

“Critical theory” refers to a family of theories that aim at a critique and transformation of society by integrating normative perspectives with empirically informed analysis of society’s conflicts, contradictions, and tendencies. In a narrow sense, “Critical Theory” (often denoted with capital letters) refers to the work of several generations of philosophers and social theorists in the Western European Marxist tradition known as the Frankfurt School. Beginning in the 1930s at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, it is best known for interdisciplinary research that combines philosophy and social science with the practical aim of furthering emancipation. There are separate entries on influential figures of the first generation of the Frankfurt School – [Max Horkheimer](#) (1895–1973), [Theodor W. Adorno](#) (1903–1969), [Herbert Marcuse](#) (1898–1979), and [Walter Benjamin](#) (1892–1940) – and the leading figure of the second generation, [Jürgen Habermas](#) (b. 1929).

In a broader sense, there are many different strands of critical theory that have emerged as forms of reflective engagement with the emancipatory goals of various social and political movements, such as feminist theory, critical race theory, queer theory, and postcolonial/decolonial theory. In another, third sense, “critical theory” or sometimes just “Theory” is used to refer to work by theorists associated with psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, such as [Michel Foucault](#) and [Jacques Derrida](#) (see these separate entries as well as the entry on [postmodernism](#)).

This entry is primarily focused on the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, but broadens outward at various points to discuss engagements by that tradition with a range of critical theories and social developments. The need for a broad approach to critical theory is prompted today by a range of contemporary social, political, economic, and ecological crises and struggles as well as the critique of Eurocentric forms of knowledge production.

- 1. The Frankfurt School: Origins, Influences, and Development
 - 1.1 Origins and Generations
 - 1.2 Influences
 - 1.3 Critical Theory versus Traditional Theory
 - 1.4 Studies on Authoritarianism and Mass Culture
 - 1.5 The Dialectic of Enlightenment
 - 1.6 The Communicative Turn
 - 1.7 A Continuing and Contested Tradition
- 2. Critical Methods
 - 2.1 Immanent Critique
 - 2.2 Normative Foundations for Critique
 - 2.3 Reconstructive Critique
 - 2.4 Disclosive Critique, Genealogy, and the Critique of Normativity
 - 2.5 Current Challenges
- 3. Critical Concepts
 - 3.1 Alienation
 - 3.2 Reification
 - 3.3 Ideology
 - 3.4 Emancipation
- 4. Critical Theories Today
 - 4.1 Theorizing Struggles and Movements
 - 4.1.1 Gender
 - 4.1.2 Race
 - 4.1.3 Colonialism and Post-colonialism
 - 4.2 Diagnosing Crises
 - 4.2.1 Economic Crises
 - 4.2.2 Ecological Crises
 - 4.2.3 Political Crises
 - 4.3 Critical Practices
- Bibliography

- [Academic Tools](#)
 - [Other Internet Resources](#)
 - [Related Entries](#)
-

1. The Frankfurt School: Origins, Influences, and Development

The “Frankfurt School” of critical theory is not really a school at all. It is a loosely held together tradition constituted by ongoing debates among adherents about how best to define and develop that tradition. This includes disagreements about methods, about how to interpret earlier figures and texts in the tradition, about whether past shifts in focus were advances or dead ends, and about how to respond to new challenges arising from other schools of thought and current social developments. This section tells a largely chronological story, focusing on the origins, influences, and key texts of the Frankfurt School, and concludes with reference to ongoing debates on how to inherit and continue the tradition.

1.1 Origins and Generations

In their attempt to combine philosophy and social science in a critical theory with emancipatory intent, the wide-ranging work of the first generation of the Frankfurt School was methodologically innovative. They revised and updated Marxism by integrating it with the work of Sigmund Freud, Max Weber, and Friedrich Nietzsche while developing a model of radical critique that is immanently anchored in social reality. They used this model to analyze a wide range of phenomena – from authoritarianism as a political formation and as it manifests in both the nuclear family and deep-seated psychological dispositions, to the effects of capitalism on psychological, social, cultural, and political formations as well as on the production of knowledge itself (for excellent guides, see Thompson 2017 and Gordon et al. 2019).

Max Horkheimer outlined the original research agenda for the Frankfurt School in his 1931 inaugural lecture upon becoming director of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt (founded in 1923). He proposed an interdisciplinary research program combining philosophy and social theory with psychology, political economy, and cultural analysis (Horkheimer 1931). In that way, “social philosophy” aims at providing an encompassing interpretation of social reality as a whole – as “social totality,” to use a concept central to the Marxist tradition (Jay 1984).

Other key figures of the first generation include Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin, along with Erich Fromm, Friedrich Pollock, Leo Löwenthal, Franz Neumann, Otto Kirchheimer, and figures like Siegfried Kracauer, who belonged to the broader circle for a few years (for rich historical accounts, see Jay 1973, Buck-Morss 1977, Dubiel 1978, Wiggershaus 1986, Wheatland 2009). The work of the largely Jewish members of the first generation was deeply marked by the rise of National Socialism, the experience of exile, and, for some of its inner circle, their return to Germany after 1945. After the Nazis closed the Institute, Horkheimer, who had already moved it to Geneva, re-established it at Columbia University in 1934, where he was soon joined by Pollock, Marcuse, and Löwenthal, while Adorno did not emigrate to the US until 1938. Horkheimer, Adorno, and Pollock moved the Institute from New York to Los Angeles in 1941. Those three reestablished the Institute in Germany after the War, with Horkheimer as director from 1951 to 1958 and Adorno from 1958 to 1969. Key figures who worked with first generation figures during this period emerged as the second generation: Jürgen Habermas, Alfred Schmidt, Albrecht Wellmer, Oskar Negt, and Claus Offe.

Habermas was the leading figure of this second generation, taking up Horkheimer’s chair in Frankfurt in 1964 before moving to a research post in Starnberg in 1971. Habermas returned to Frankfurt in 1981, retiring from this position in 1994. Axel Honneth worked closely with Habermas in the 1980s and took over the chair in social philosophy in Frankfurt in 1996; Honneth was also director of, and largely responsible for the revival of, the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt from 2001 to 2018. He is considered a leading figure in the third generation, along with Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser, and Christoph Menke (Anderson 2000, Allen 2010). Going beyond the second and third generations of the Frankfurt School, there are far too many figures to list; and the focal points for critical theory in this tradition have expanded, both geographically – with prominent figures in the United States and an active reception in Latin America – and thematically – for example, with a turn to feminism (see [§4.1.1](#)).

1.2 Influences

The first generation of the Frankfurt School took inspiration from an earlier generation of critical theorists: “Left Hegelians” in Germany who, after Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s death in 1831, applied his philosophy critically to social and political phenomena like religion and the state, maintaining that the progressive realization of freedom in history that was central to Hegel’s thought was not yet complete and required a fundamental transformation of the status quo. Karl Marx became the most influential of this group. In a materialist transformation of Hegel’s thought, Marx analyzed the concrete conditions for realizing autonomy for all and viewed philosophy itself as conditioned by socioeconomic developments. By developing a critique of political economy in order to

analyze the nature of capitalism and the possibilities for revolutionary social transformation, Marx set the standard for future generations of critical theory by combining radical philosophy with a critique of the best available social science of the day in the pursuit of emancipation.

Marx's early writings, in the 1840s, were written when capitalist modernization was only just beginning in Germany, but he already saw contradictory social relations as the objective condition of capitalist society and exploited workers as a nascent revolutionary force. By the time the Frankfurt School began working out a critical theory of society in the 1930s much had changed as Germany had emerged as a leading economic power in an industrialized, capitalist Europe. Frankfurt School theorists were committed to social transformation, but the vehicle for change Marx identified – workers in advanced capitalist states like Germany – not only lacked revolutionary consciousness, but would soon embrace fascist politics when faced with economic crisis and mass unemployment. Radical social theorists would need revised analytical tools.

To study the psychology of individuals and groups along with social and cultural influences on that psychology, they could not rely on the then-dominant dogmatic versions of scientific Marxism (Pensky 2019). To understand how social conflicts get denied or repressed, and why individuals and groups turn to authoritarian politics that seem not to align with their class interests, they turned to Freudian psychoanalysis. In contrast to orthodox Marxism, they analyzed individual and group psychology, changes in the modern family, and the cultural “superstructure” of society, not just the material “base,” in order to understand how the rise of “mass culture” and the decline of authority figures in the family led to the decline of critical capacities both in the individual psyche and in society generally. This effort to combine Marx and Freud is one of the distinctive features of the Frankfurt School; exactly how to integrate psychoanalytic theory into critical theory has been a long-standing debate (Marcuse 1955, Whitebook 1995, Honneth 2010, Part IV; Allen and O'Connor 2019, Allen 2021).

In addition to incorporating insights from Freud's psychoanalytic theory, early critical theorists drew on Max Weber's social theory to analyze contemporary society. Crucial here was Weber's theory of rationalization, which stressed the growing dominance of instrumental rationality, or means-end reasoning, through the expanding bureaucratization of society. Weber posited a loss of freedom, due to the “iron cage” of modern bureaucracy, and a loss of meaning generated by the “disenchantment of the world” associated with secularization. Weber's work was crucial for Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of instrumental reason (1947) as well as for Habermas's later theory of communicative action (1981).

In synthesizing Marx and Weber, the first generation of critical theory was heavily influenced by Georg Lukács's attempt to do the same in his ground-breaking 1923 essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” (see Brunkhorst 1983). Radically extending Marx's analysis of commodities by analyzing how they transform the character of society as a whole, and drawing on Weber to describe a process of rationalization that extends to all aspects of life, Lukács used the term “reification” (see 3.2 below) to describe how the commodity form transforms the consciousness of those living in capitalist societies, who then see all social relations, even their relation to themselves, as taking on a “thing-like” character.

The classic philosophical influences on the Frankfurt School range widely, from Immanuel Kant and German Idealism to Nietzsche. In some form, Kant's appeal to *Mündigkeit* (autonomy, maturity, responsibility) in his famous essay “What is Enlightenment?” – with its call for freely and publicly making use of reason – animates the ideal of emancipation throughout the work of the Frankfurt School, along with the Kantian conception of the critique of reason: the use of reason to reflect on the limits of reason. But its adherents follow Hegel and Marx in focusing on the social, cultural, and material conditions for achieving autonomy and insisting that reason is always socially and historically embedded. For first generation critical theorists, this entailed a critique of Kant's own individualist and repressive understanding of autonomy as it arises within capitalist social conditions (Horkheimer 1933) and formalizes the domination of our own inner nature (Horkheimer and Adorno 1947, Excursus II, Adorno 1963a, Chs. 10–11). Some later critical theorists have engaged more positively with Kant, as in Habermas's attempt to “detranscendentalize” core aspects of Kant's transcendental philosophy (Habermas 2005, Ch. 2) and Rainer Forst's Kantian constructivism in moral and political theory (Forst 2007, 2021a).

Hegel's work has been a continual reference point for Frankfurt School philosophers, with key figures in the tradition – from Marcuse (1941) and Adorno (1963b) to Benhabib (1986, Part I) and Honneth (1992, 2001, 2011) – contributing both substantive studies and relying on Hegel's methodology either for its holistic approach or as a paradigm of immanent critique while eschewing his metaphysical, teleological, and reconciliatory tendencies. Honneth first built on Hegel's account of the struggle for recognition and the intersubjective conditions for living an autonomous life (Honneth 1992) before developing his own account of the practices and institutions of modern ethical life that realize freedom in a way that goes beyond its liberal and Kantian interpretations (Honneth 2011). Rahel Jaeggi builds on Hegel's method of immanent critique in her account of progressive social change as learning processes in response to problems, contradictions, and crises that arise from within ethically thick forms of life (Jaeggi 2014).

In aiming to explain irrationality, the first generation extended the critique of reason, going beyond rationalist philosophers like Kant and Hegel to figures like Freud and Nietzsche. They turned to Nietzsche in particular as a critic of modern bourgeois culture and the violent formation of individual subjectivity. Engagement with Nietzsche's thought extends from early essays by Horkheimer (1933, 1936a) through Horkheimer and Adorno's shift toward doing critical theory in a more Nietzschean spirit with the genealogy of reason in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), and Habermas's more

critical take on Nietzsche's supposed irrationalism (1985, Ch. 3-4), to contemporary authors such as Menke, who returns to Nietzsche as a positive reference point in the critique of the repressive dimensions of the modern ideal of equality (2000) and for a genealogical analysis of the modern subject who demands rights (2015).

One way of categorizing work by later generations of the Frankfurt School is to note how, even when drawing on a range of theoretical resources, they give pride of place to the legacy of a particular figure like Kant, Hegel, Marx, or Nietzsche (often via Foucault), or how they combine approaches. For instance, Honneth and Jaeggi are more Hegelian while Forst is more Kantian, and Benhabib is, like Habermas, a Hegelianized Kantian, and Fraser draws heavily on Marx in recent work while Amy Allen and Martin Saar are influenced by Foucauldian genealogy. The latter is part of a broader engagement between the Frankfurt School and post-structuralism, ranging from the more critical (Habermas 1985) through the more sympathetic (Honneth 1985, Menke 1988, 2000) to attempts to combine deconstructive and reconstructive approaches to critical theory (McCarthy 1991; see also Fraser 1989).

It is not easy to capture key features of an intellectual tradition shaped by such a variety of influences, including multiple figures whose own thinking changed over time, and a body of work addressing a vast range of topics spanning from the 1930s to the present. The rest of this section outlines some of the main arguments and focal points of key texts by key figures. It is not meant to be exhaustive, but to identify influential methodological approaches, arguments, and themes that are indicative of the work of the Frankfurt School and still provide important reference points for contemporary debates.

1.3 Critical Theory versus Traditional Theory

One largely undisputed reference for defining Frankfurt School critical theory is Horkheimer's 1937 essay "Traditional and Critical Theory," in which he defines critical theory by contrasting it with traditional theories that take the existing social order as given. Social sciences do this, for example, when they model themselves after the natural sciences in attempting to descriptively mirror a given set of facts or establish law-like generalizations. The point is not that empirical social research is invalid, but that traditional theories fail to analyze the broader social context in which they are embedded. This form of "positivism" views science as a purely theoretical undertaking divorced from practical interests even while it actually serves a particular social function in relying on established concepts and categories in a way that reinforces dominant ideologies and power structures. In that way, the forms of knowledge production that we rely on for insight into the social order become obstacles to social change.

Critical theory, by contrast, reflects on the context of its own origins and aims to be a transformative force within that context. It explicitly embraces an interdisciplinary methodology that aims to bridge the gap between empirical research and the kind of philosophical thinking needed to grasp the overall historical situation and mediate between specialized empirical disciplines. Critical theory aims not merely to describe social reality, but to generate insights into the forces of domination operating within society in a way that can inform practical action and stimulate change. It aims to unite theory and practice, so that the theorist forms "a dynamic unity with the oppressed class" (1937a [1972, 215]) that is guided by an emancipatory interest - defined negatively as an interest in the "abolition of social injustice" (ibid., 242) and positively as an interest in establishing "reasonable conditions of life" (ibid., 199). "The theory never aims simply at an increase of knowledge as such," but at "emancipation from slavery" (1937b [1972, 246]) in the broadest sense of eliminating all forms of domination. The critique of traditional social science was further developed by Adorno and Habermas in the so-called positivism dispute in German sociology (Adorno et al. 1969, Wellmer 1969) and Horkheimer's model of critical theory continues to inform discussions about how social critique might be carried out today in a variety of contexts (Outlaw 2005, Collins 2019, 57-65).

1.4 Studies on Authoritarianism and Mass Culture

Nothing epitomizes the Frankfurt School's interdisciplinary approach to analyzing irrational elements of modern society better than their studies of authoritarianism, beginning with studies of German society in the 1930s and continuing with studies of the U.S. in the 1940s. This work combined philosophy, social theory, and psychoanalytic theory with empirical research.

The first substantial foray was *Studies in Authority and the Family* (Horkheimer 1936b), the product of five years of research carried out by members of the Institute as part of the research agenda outlined by Horkheimer when he became director in 1930. In an essay articulating the study's theoretical framework, Erich Fromm argued that the "drives underlying the authoritarian character" are "the pleasure of obedience, submission, and the surrender of one's personality" along with "aggression against the defenseless and sympathy with the powerful" (Fromm 1936 [2020, 39, 41]). A main concern of the *Studies* was that the nuclear family had lost the power it once had to counter other socializing forces, which could now more directly influence the individual, and that individuals who view the world as governed by irrational forces submit to powerful leaders who ease their feelings of powerlessness.

The focus on authoritarianism continued into exile, with Neumann and Kirchheimer focusing more on distinctly political phenomena such as law, the state structure, and competing political groups under the Nazi regime (see Neumann 1944, Scheuerman 1996). Neumann and Kirchheimer were the main legal and political analysts of the first generation, but were outside the inner circle and less influential on the trajectory the Frankfurt School took in the 1940s (see Scheuerman 1994 and Buchstein 2020 for attempts to revive interest in their legal and political analysis).

The work on authoritarianism that the Institute is most well-known for came with the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), the result of research conducted by Adorno in collaboration with a team of psychologists at the University of California, Berkeley. The aim was to identify personality types that might be susceptible to authoritarianism, based not on explicit commitments to fascist political movements but on psychological characteristics and social attitudes (measured on an “F-scale”). The researchers posited that individuals with an authoritarian personality tend to exhibit traits such as rigid conformity to conventional norms, a tendency toward stereotypical thinking, a preference for strong authority figures and disdain for perceived weakness, a preoccupation with power and status, and a propensity for prejudice and hostility towards minority groups. The book explored the link between authoritarianism and antisemitism, highlighting the role of scapegoating and the projection of repressed aggression onto targeted minority groups.

The text was published in a series edited by Horkheimer, titled *Studies in Prejudice*, along with other innovative studies such as *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator* (1949), a psychoanalytic analysis of the rhetoric and tropes of American demagogues authored by Frankfurt School member Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman. If *The Authoritarian Personality* studied the kinds of people potentially receptive to the messages of authoritarian leaders, *Prophets of Deceit* studied the content of the messaging itself. Adorno would later follow up on all these themes – both the form and content of fascist agitation and the social and psychological conditions under which it can succeed (1951b, 1967a).

The Authoritarian Personality had a major impact on the field of political sociology, inspiring a wave of similar studies and commentary. The recent resurgence of authoritarian populism has inspired renewed interest in Frankfurt School analysis of authoritarianism (see [Section 4.2](#) below) in conjunction with publication of new editions of some of the classic texts along with previously untranslated work by Kracauer on totalitarian propaganda dating from the late 1930s (Kracauer 2013 [2022]) and a 1967 lecture by Adorno on “Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism” (Adorno 1967a [2020]).

One point of continuity between the studies of authoritarianism and Frankfurt School cultural analysis more broadly was the idea that “mass culture” was one of the powerful forces playing an increasing role in the direct socialization of individuals, a role that led to the “disappearance of the inner life” of the individual (Horkheimer 1941) and an increasing loss of the ability to imagine a world any different than the existing one. In its various forms, this general thesis was common to Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse in their critiques of mass culture from the 1930s to the 1960s.

More generally, the Frankfurt School is known for its analysis of popular culture. By contrast to orthodox Marxist dismissal of cultural analysis for focusing on the less consequential “superstructure” of society, Frankfurt School theorists attentively analyzed the form and content of cultural objects along with the genres and modes of producing works of art and popular culture. In an early essay titled “Mass Ornament” (1927), Kracauer argued that analyzing the “inconspicuous surface-level expressions” of an epoch, by virtue of their “unconscious nature,” can disclose its “fundamental substance” and “unheeded impulses” (1927 [1975, 75]). Adorno would later maintain that “cultural criticism must become social physiognomy” (1951a [1967, 30]), a method he pursued in his interpretations of works of literature and music by interpreting the surface features and forms of various cultural artifacts in relation to underlying social conditions as a mode of disclosive critique.

The more pessimistic analysis of mass culture of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse can be distinguished from the more optimistic views developed by Kracauer and Walter Benjamin. Benjamin posited, in his famous essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility” (1936), that the rise of technologies for mechanical reproduction, such as photography and film, led to the decline of the “aura” surrounding traditional works of art – the “authenticity” associated with the unique presence of the original in space and time – in part because it makes no sense to talk about the “original” version of a photograph. The resulting changes in perception and modes of collective experience and participation in cultural production could, Benjamin hoped, also bring about political forms of art and a more general democratization of culture. He contrasted this emancipatory potential of mass culture, through a politicization of aesthetics, with the aestheticization of politics under fascism (Buck-Morss 1992). Adorno expressed his disagreement in an earlier letter to Benjamin and in published work (Adorno 1936, 1938). As Wellmer puts it, “in technologized mass culture, Benjamin sees elements of an antidote to the psychic destruction of society, whereas Adorno regards it above all as a medium of conformism and psychic manipulation” (1985/86 [1991, 32–33]). While Benjamin placed hope in mass culture, Adorno saw it lying in the kind of autonomous art that resists reconciling subjects to their social world, instead offering a kind of “promise of happiness” in a transfigured future that lies beyond that social world (Adorno 1970, Finlayson 2015, Gordon 2023).

1.5 The Dialectic of Enlightenment

The critique of mass culture took its most dramatic form in the chapter on the “culture industry” in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (first circulated in 1944 and published in 1947). They introduced the term “culture industry” to underline the fact that “mass culture” is not

something “the masses” spontaneously generate (Adorno 1967b [1991, 98]), but is manufactured using the same standardized and profit-oriented methods as any industrial production method. In this sense, culture is no longer a relatively autonomous realm of meaning (that might aim, at its best, at beauty, freedom, and truth) or source of critical awareness, but is thoroughly commodified by the “distraction factories” of the culture industry. “Cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer *also* commodities, they are commodities through and through” (ibid., 129). Entertainment replaces experience, numbing the audience’s capacity for critical thought and reconciling them to the status quo in a form of domination far more subtle than direct tyranny.

In this way, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which is perhaps the most influential text by Frankfurt School philosophers, analyzes two forms of mass society, fascist Germany and the United States, focusing primarily on the latter. Co-authored by Horkheimer and Adorno between 1939 and 1944 at the height of Nazi rule and World War II, the text opens with these lines:

Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity (1947 [2002, 1]).

The book is a genealogy of reason that traces its self-destruction from the dawn of human history to the present. Reason was supposed to liberate human beings. Instead, in the dominant form it takes as instrumental rationality, it has become the primary instrument of their domination. With reason taking this form, humans lose their capacity for critical reflection as their thinking is increasingly oriented solely toward self-preservation within a system in which they are powerless. “Thought is reified as an autonomous, automatic process, aping the machine it has itself produced, so that it can finally be replaced by the machine” (ibid., 19).

The root of the catastrophic dynamic lies not just with modernity or capitalism, but goes back to humanity’s earliest attempts to dominate nature. A core thesis of the book is that myth and enlightenment are entwined. The process of enlightenment began with the earliest attempts to overcome “mythic fear” as a way of explaining the unknown and mitigating threats from nature. This anthropological claim about enlightenment is combined with a historical claim about the Enlightenment and the rise of modern science and technology. This is when instrumental rationality truly comes to dominate, as means-end calculation is the kind of reasoning required for capitalist production and efficient bureaucracy. “Enlightenment is totalitarian” (ibid., 50), Adorno and Horkheimer argue; it subsumes everything under its dissolvent rationality. In this way, enlightenment reverts back to myth.

The book represents a shift away from the critique of political economy, indebted to Marx, to the critique of instrumental reason, indebted to Weber (Benhabib 1986, 149–163). Although this shift is sometimes attributed to the growing pessimism of its authors during National Socialism, it was also motivated by Pollock’s analysis of the shift from nineteenth-century liberal capitalism to “state capitalism”: increased intervention by the state into the economy meant that the primacy of the economy posited by Marx had been replaced by the primacy of politics (1941). This claim supported the focus in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on the administered control of society by the state apparatus. The book paints a bleak picture of a society in which people live “totally administered lives” under the sway of efficient and calculating institutions. For the sake of self-preservation, they adapt themselves entirely to this apparatus. All the while the culture industry, as an “organ of mass deception,” keeps them entertained at the price of numbing their critical capacities, producing conformity, and undermining any sense of individuality or capacity for autonomy. The book also represents a shift away from the earlier idea of critical theory as interdisciplinary social theory, which could marshal the findings of empirical social science toward the practical aim of emancipation, and more toward speculative history. In the story they tell, the effects of domination are so ubiquitous that every form of scientific knowledge is corrupted.

If Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was supposed to provide the grounds for a positive concept of enlightenment – as they maintained in its preface (1947 [2002, xviii]) – many critics have wondered what that is supposed to be (Wellmer 1983). Habermas would later argue that the authors needed to leave “at least one rational criterion intact for their explanation of the corruption of *all* rational criteria” in order to “set the normative foundations of critical social theory;” but they failed to do so (1985 [1987, 127–9]; see also Benhabib 1986).

Reappraisals of the text in recent decades range from defending its approach as a form of world-disclosive critique (Kompridis 2006) that reveals our familiar social world as pathological by using techniques like “rhetorical condensation” (Honneth 1998), to reading it as developing a dialectical conception of progress – not simply a history of decline – aimed at making us more aware of the inevitable entanglement of reason with power (Allen 2014, 2016), and attempts to build on the chapter on antisemitism, which analyzes its social function in providing a “release valve” that allows rage to be “vented on those who are both conspicuous and unprotected” (1947 [2002, 140]), thereby stabilizing domination by channeling potential resistance to social suffering into hatred of a group (Rabinbach 2000, Rensmann 2017).

Herbert Marcuse’s influential book *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) – best summarized by its subtitle, *Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* – can be read as an attempt to

update *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the form of a diagnosis of U.S. society and its perfected mechanisms of pacification and social control, ranging from art, sexuality, and politics to philosophy and the very act of thinking. Marcuse argues that all forms of critical thought and practice, having been wholly integrated into the wasteful, dehumanizing, profit-seeking, imperialist logic of advanced capitalism, are subsumed by one-dimensional ideology, a “flattening out of the antagonism between culture and social reality” (61).

Marcuse developed his influential concept of “repressive desublimation” to explain how the manipulated need for instant gratification has sanitized any transgressive forces within the domains of sexuality and art. Prior to the rise of the “affluent society,” art contained a transcendent capacity in the sense that it thought of, engaged with, and appropriated the idea of breaking out of the world in which one lived and embodied the hope for a better one to replace it. Within late capitalism, art has lost this critical aspect and dissolved into consumer culture and technological rationality, masking the “surplus repression” that shapes human instincts and needs in line with the functional requirements of social domination and the reproduction of the status quo.

Marcuse’s work has been criticized for its totalizing diagnosis of domination, his reliance on an objectivist account of human nature and needs, and the paternalistic or even authoritarian implications that possibly result from combining these two elements (Jaeggi 2014 [2018, 104–108]). Nonetheless, it has remained an important reference point for the critique of technology (Feenberg 2023a, 2023b, Fong 2016, Ch. 5) and of false needs, and of new right-wing forms of “repressive desublimation” that affirm the status quo in a transgressive mode (Brown 2019, 165–169). Regardless of how one today assesses Marcuse’s concrete analyses, his work exemplifies a tension that all critical theories have to address between the dominating forces of one-dimensionality and the possibility of breaking free of them.

First-generation critical theorists posited various responses to their own bleak diagnoses of society from the 1940s to the 1960s. Marcuse supported rebellious social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, in contrast to other leading representatives of critical theory who kept a conspicuous distance. In *One-Dimensional Man*, he placed hope for overcoming the repressive, one-dimensional society in a “Great Refusal” to abide by its norms, as carried out by the “substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable” (1964, 256). He later expressed solidarity with, and saw as examples of this refusal in, both the global student movement (1968, 119) and the feminist movement with its aim of overcoming dominant forms of aggressive masculinity (1974). He likewise praised counter-cultural movements for expressing sexual, moral, and political rebellion in a non-aggressive form of life that might generate a total change in values (1967). For Marcuse, emancipation involves a new morality that fulfills the vital needs for joy and happiness and encompasses an aesthetic-erotic dimension that is foreshadowed in alternative artistic tastes and new social and cultural practices. While Horkheimer and Adorno were less supportive of rebellious social movements, they did become important institutional figures and public intellectuals after their return to Germany (Müller-Doohm 2003, part IV; Demirović 2016). Adorno’s radio addresses in particular can be viewed as an attempt to educate the public for autonomy and so as a kind of response to their own bleak diagnoses of society.

But the core of Adorno’s response, from the early essay on the culture industry to his posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), was to posit that “autonomous” or “authentic” art, by contrast to the products of the culture industry, maintains a utopian impulse insofar as it points beyond, and provides a moment of resistance to, the status quo. For example, atonal music by composers like Arnold Schoenberg generates dissonance in the listener by challenging the unity of the whole found in more harmonious music. Adorno maintained that such art, in challenging aesthetic norms and conventions, can provide aesthetic experiences that are resistant to the homogenizing forces of the culture industry. Critics of this turn to the aesthetic have wondered how this is supposed to provide a sound basis for a critical theory of society (Benhabib 1986, 222).

But one can argue that Adorno’s later work was an attempt to push against that kind of grounding for critical theory. The title of Adorno’s 1966 magnum opus, *Negative Dialectics* (1966a), refers to a methodology that takes from traditional Hegelian dialectics the emphasis on difference and mediation but abandons the attempt to overcome difference through a unifying synthesis. Instead, taking up an argument already developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno argues that “identity thinking” and the “identity principle” have been at the basis of humanity’s destructive project of cognitive as well as practical domination of external as well as internal nature, thereby linking the philosophical to the social oppression of particularity. Adorno rejects “identity thinking” in favor of affirming the negative, namely “non-identity,” that is, the irreducible particularity of objects, experiences, and persons that cannot be subsumed under concepts.

This approach undermines the totalizing aspirations of theoretical systems in philosophy as traditionally understood. The struggle to recognize that which is nonidentical is not only an epistemological but also an ethical and political project that seeks to do justice to both the object and the subject of cognition in their irreducible individuality (Bernstein 2001). Linking epistemology and the philosophy of language to critical theory of society, this leads Adorno to reject not only Hegel’s affirmative synthesis but also Heideggerian ontology and Kantian dualism. Methodologically, Adorno explores alternative ways of thinking about how to use and develop philosophical concepts, taking up the Benjaminian notion of constellation and developing “critical models” in order to articulate the complexity of experience, and suffering, without reducing or constraining it. In Adorno’s view, negative dialectics is a form of immanent critique engaged in a dynamic and transformative process, as it “must transform the concepts which it brings, as it were, from outside into those which the object has of itself, into what the object, left to itself, seeks to be, and confront it with what it is”

(Adorno 1957 [1976, 69]). In his cultural criticism and interventions in public debates, Adorno follows this paradigm by exploring how concrete experiences exemplify a form of social domination that is obscured by mass culture but also open up the possibility of transcending reified consciousness by articulating the internal contradictions within social reality.

1.6 The Communicative Turn

Jürgen Habermas, who worked closely with Horkheimer and Adorno in the 1950s until he fell out of favor with Horkheimer for seeming too radical, inherited one of the central claims of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, namely that Enlightenment is inseparable from the self-critique of Enlightenment, while also insisting on the context-transcending force of reason embedded in everyday practice.

Two works from the 1960s established his status as a leading figure in the second generation: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) and *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968b). In the former, Habermas provides a historical and conceptual reconstruction of the idea of the public sphere in which subjects recognize each other as equals, submit to the “force of the better argument,” and subject legislation to the public use of reason. Against the backdrop of its emergence in eighteenth-century European societies, Habermas identifies the internal contradictions of the public sphere under the conditions of capitalism and traces its decline under the combined pressure of mass culture and mass media that has gradually transformed a reasoning public into passive consumers – a claim consistent with the “culture industry” thesis.

Critics argued that Habermas’s historical narrative of decline presupposes highly idealized versions of public debate and a “reasoning” public – a public that has always in truth been fragmented by class, gender, and race-based domination – and neglects the political significance of a multiplicity of subaltern and non-official public spheres and counter-publics (Negt and Kluge 1972, Fraser 1990, Warner 2002, Allen 2012). Nevertheless, his critical analysis of a contemporary public of consumers as the objects of processes of de-politicization, commercialization, political manipulation, and refeudalization seems to have lost nothing of its relevance (Seeliger and Seignani 2022). The claim that a robust and independent public sphere is crucial to a healthy democracy is central to Habermas’s later, systematic contribution to democratic theory in *Between Facts and Norms* (1992), and he continues to analyze recent transformations in the structures and modes of communication within the public sphere (Habermas 2006, 2021).

Habermas’s *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968b) was an ambitious attempt to ground critical social theory as a form of inquiry aimed at fostering a distinct type of knowledge tied to a deep-seated human interest in emancipation. This was a return to Horkheimer’s methodological aims in “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1937), but with a novel set of arguments, such as Habermas’s claim that the method of critical theory can be illuminated by way of an analogy with psychoanalysis – “the only tangible example of a science incorporating methodological self-reflection” (1968b [1971, 124]). Like Horkheimer, Habermas was critical of the positivist understanding of science for failing to see the connection between specific kinds of inquiry and fundamental human interests. Habermas posited that both the natural sciences and the “human sciences” (interpretive social sciences and humanities) are grounded in distinct practical interests. The natural sciences are a reflective extension of “labor” (instrumental action), which is tied to the practical interest in material reproduction. The human sciences are a reflective extension of “interaction” (linguistic communication), which is tied to the practical interest in symbolic reproduction. Habermas distinguished “critique” or “reflection” as a third practice organized around the interest in emancipation, understood in terms of overcoming various forms of heteronomy, domination, and dependency.

In the early 1970s, Habermas largely abandoned this framework, based in an anthropology of knowledge, though he did continue to pursue some of its themes, and epistemological questions have remained central to his work in at least two domains: first, in his “postmetaphysical” (non-foundationalist and fallibilistic) understanding of philosophy as a form of critical reflection at the intersection between science and society (Habermas 1983a, Ch. 1) and, second, in his critique of naturalism, especially neuroscience as a form of positivism or scientism that absolutizes the observer’s perspective, thereby negating the irreducibility of the participants’ perspective and occluding the normative structure of interpersonal communication (Habermas 2005, Ch. 6).

Habermas increasingly came to the view that critical theory needed more robust social-theoretical and normative foundations, since, in his eyes, the totalizing critique of the first generation had proven to be self-undermining (1985, Ch. 5) and his own approach in *Knowledge and Human Interests* had conflated the reconstruction of invariant structures of communication (formal pragmatics) with the critique of the false consciousness of particular persons and societies (1973a). Habermas’s alternative path, after abandoning that methodological framework, was to focus on communicative reason in a two-volume magnum opus titled *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981). By contrast with an instrumentalist understanding of reason and action, Habermas’s “communicative turn” starts from a reconstruction of the rational and normative potential of everyday interactions.

This turn involves a multidimensional paradigm shift, illustrating the theoretical ambition of Habermas’s enterprise. He develops a theory of communicative action and rationality that is anchored in everyday practices of communication, in which we raise validity claims whose normative dynamic is context-transcendent and which allow for consensus-based coordination of action. He provides a historical reconstruction of modern rationalization processes, in which social integration via authority or shared tradition has been increasingly replaced by an expanded use of communicative

reason in response to the pressure to cooperate. Finally, he constructs a two-level model of society based on the distinction between “system” and “lifeworld,” claiming that the regulation of coexistence in modern societies depends on both communication oriented towards mutual understanding (“lifeworld”) and on the anonymous systems of state bureaucracy and the capitalist market (“system”).

For the methodological renewal of critical theory, Habermas’s central claim is that within complex societies, social order always has a double form: It must simultaneously be viewed as lifeworld and as system. The lifeworld can only be understood from the hermeneutic perspective of its participants while the mechanisms of systemic integration only come into view from a system-theoretical or external perspective. Critical theory needs both perspectives in order to identify distorting effects of the system on the lifeworld. Habermas famously and controversially diagnoses a “colonization of the lifeworld” by the systemic media of money and power, which impose economic and administrative rationality – the main forms of “functionalist reason” – on areas of the lifeworld whose reproduction relies on communicative processes of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization that cannot be subsumed under the media of money and power without generating resistance. This provides a new foundation for critical theory by updating the critique of reification in the form of a critique of systematic distortions of communication. The “critique of functionalist reason” becomes a central task for critical theory, along with the aim of diagnosing the “selective pattern” of capitalist modernization that only partially realizes the actually available potential for rationality and learning within society.

In the ensuing discussion, Habermas was accused of reifying the “system” by conceptualizing the capitalist market and the bureaucratic state as functionally necessary and supposedly norm-free systems that lie beyond the theoretical reach of critical social theory and the political reach of emancipatory politics (Honneth and Joas 1991), of idealizing the lifeworld in ways that largely ignore the domination and exploitation of women and minorities (Fraser 1985), of subscribing to a progressivist theory of modernization and history that is Eurocentric and insensitive to the continuing effects of colonial domination (Allen 2016, Ch. 2), and of underestimating how deeply power penetrates into and distorts the very heart of communicative reason (Allen 2008, Chs. 5–6).

Habermas and his followers insist that while these phenomena are real, it is only the power of communicative reason – and the public discourses and deliberations in which it manifests itself and gets institutionalized – that allows us to detect, criticize, and ultimately overcome (if only partially and temporarily) those forms of domination. Whether one agrees or not that the communicative turn enables critical theory to analyze and bring to agents’ attention the distortions that block them from addressing and overcoming obstacles to emancipation, one important legacy of Habermas’s theory can be seen in opening up space for a methodologically pluralist critical theory in response to the fundamental need to capture the perspective of both participants and observers (Bohman 2003). Some Frankfurt School theorists have also built on Habermas’s system-lifeworld distinction in maintaining that social change must be viewed from the perspective of both “evolution” and “revolution” (Brunkhorst 2002, 2014).

1.7 A Continuing and Contested Tradition

One dominant story told about the Frankfurt School begins with Horkheimer’s original research program in the 1930s and views Horkheimer and Adorno’s radical departure from that vision in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) as an intellectual dead end from which Habermas rescued the tradition and returned it to its original methodology. From this perspective, the second generation, dominated by Habermas, superseded the first (see Kompridis 2006, 255–258, for a critique of this story). An alternative story would point out that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was in many ways consistent with themes first articulated by Adorno in work from the 1930s – particularly his 1931 inaugural lecture, heavily inspired by Benjamin – that ultimately came to fruition in *Negative Dialectics* (1966a). To complicate matters in another way, while collaborating on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the 1940s Adorno also contributed to the interdisciplinary collaboration that culminated in *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), a product of Horkheimer’s original vision for critical theory that combined social theory with empirical research.

Rather than viewing the second generation solely in terms of Habermas overcoming deficits in the first, this alternative story recognizes that there have always been multiple models and styles of critical theory operating simultaneously within the tradition and that Adorno was heavily influenced by Benjamin prior to collaborating with Horkheimer (Buck-Morss 1977, Wolin 1994, 166, 265–274). Moreover, Adorno’s influence is evident in work by figures in the second generation such as Albrecht Wellmer (1933–2018), who used Adorno’s work as a basis for challenging Habermas’s approach (Wellmer 1985/86, 1993) and was far more sympathetic with post-structuralism than Habermas – also true of Wellmer’s students in the third generation, Christoph Menke (1988, 2000) and Martin Seel. Adorno scholars have defended his work directly against Habermas’s criticisms (Cook 2004, O’Connor 2004: 165–170), and critical theorists continue to defend Adorno’s approach to critical theory (Allen 2016, 2021, 175–183, Marasco 2015, Ch. 3).

To complicate the story further, Benjamin’s work has had an enormous influence on work by a variety of critical theorists, though his wider influence had to wait until Adorno collected Benjamin’s essays for a German audience in 1955 and Hannah Arendt edited them for English readers in 1968. There have been significant studies of Benjamin’s work by scholars working within the Frankfurt School tradition (see Buck-Morss 1989 and Pensky 1993), while many critical theorists beyond the Frankfurt School have engaged Benjamin’s critique of linear notions of progress, and the ways in which they fail to break with the catastrophic continuity of the present (Benjamin 1940, see Löwy 2001), as well

as his analysis of the constitutive relation between law and violence (Benjamin 1920/21; see the recently published critical edition, 2021), to mention only Jacques Derrida's "Force of Law" (1990), Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* (1995), and Judith Butler's *Parting Ways* (2012) (see also Loick 2012).

Methodological debates within the Frankfurt School focus not only on the legacy of first-generation theorists but also on Habermas's earlier work, with some arguing that *Knowledge and Human Interests* is worth revisiting because it was more attuned than his subsequent work to the dynamics of power and domination, making it more apt for addressing oppression based on gender (Allen 2008) or race (McCarthy 2004), or for developing a more comprehensive critical theory of domination (Klein 2020). Honneth (2017) has recently taken Habermas's text as a jumping off point for refocusing critical theory on the task of elaborating the relation between emancipatory interests and emancipatory knowledge. Honneth nonetheless maintains that Habermas's use of the methodology of psychoanalysis as a model for emancipatory critique is not apt, while others argue that it is still in many ways productive (Celikates 2009 [2018, 137-157]; see Allen 2021, Ch. 5 for a critique of Habermas, Honneth, and Celikates).

The latter debate is part of the resurging interest in psychoanalysis by some theorists working in the Frankfurt School tradition. Habermas's own engagement with Freud and psychoanalysis in *Knowledge and Human Interests* was largely methodological in contrast to the substantive use of Freudian ideas by the first generation (in their analysis of the entanglement of reason and repression and the concrete forces of fascism and antisemitism), and Habermas (1983a) subsequently abandoned psychoanalytic theory entirely in favor of engagement with developmental psychologists like Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg. In developing his theory of recognition, Honneth (1992, Ch. 5) returned to psychoanalysis in the form of object relations theory, primarily in the work of Donald Winnicott, arguing that the experience of fusion and symbiosis that characterizes the early infant-mother relationship is foundational in two ways: It serves as the template for the type of recognition Honneth calls "love" and explains why individuals and groups continue to experience existing relations of recognition – that necessarily fall short of fusion and symbiosis – as unsatisfactory and continue to struggle for recognition. While Honneth's use of Winnicott is controversial (McAfee 2019, Ch. 2; Whitebook 2021, Deranty 2021), recent debates have more generally focused on how to take up object relations within critical theory (Allen and O'Connor 2019). As a result, the divide now seems to be primarily between those who focus on the pro-social implications of psychoanalytic theory (Honneth 2010, Part IV) and those who also stress asocial or antisocial forces of Freud's drive theory in general and the death drive in particular in order to avoid what they see as the risk of over-idealization and romanticization built into Honneth's way of integrating psychoanalysis into his theory of recognition (Allen 2021, Ch. 5). Those critics advocate returning to the more negativistic approaches familiar from first-generation critical theorists (Fong 2016, McAfee 2019, Allen 2021).

Honneth's return to the question of struggles oriented by emancipatory interests (2017) hearkens back to a shift that began in the 1980s, when a significant strand of Frankfurt School critical theory, including Honneth's early work (1985), aimed at recovering the connection between theory and practice by linking the development of theory itself to social conflicts and movements. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's *Public Sphere and Experience* (1972) is an early example of a critique of the bourgeois (i.e. hegemonic) public sphere that invokes proletarian or plebeian non-state forms of the public and the divergent critical experiences they articulate as alternative sources of normativity, while also identifying blockages they face in the form of the "consciousness industry" and the pacification of social conflicts through "pseudo-publics."

In a more explicit vein, Nancy Fraser contributed to the feminist turn in Frankfurt School critical theory – for which the work of Seyla Benhabib, Jean Cohen, and Amy Allen has also been decisive – in echoing Marx by arguing that critical theory should frame its "research program and its conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan, though not uncritical, identification" (Fraser 1985, 97), and that the Frankfurt School in general and Habermas in particular had failed to theorize one of the most significant struggles against domination: the feminist movement (see [§4.1.1](#)).

Honneth has also sought to systematically reconstruct the link between theory development and struggles by taking experiences of misrecognition that lead to social struggles for recognition as a pre-theoretical reference point (1992). Drawing on a wide range of philosophical work, psychological and psychoanalytic accounts of identity-formation, and sociological and historical accounts of social movements struggling for recognition, Honneth has developed a theory of recognition that is the most prominent alternative paradigm, within Habermasian critical theory broadly construed, to Habermas's theory of communicative action (Honneth 2000, Zürn 2015). Honneth maintains Habermas's focus on intersubjectivity, but instead of linguistic practice and the ideal of "undistorted communication," he focuses on relations of mutual recognition and the ideal of "undistorted recognition," which then serve as the basis for the critique of "social pathologies" that he considers central to the project of critical theory (Honneth 2004).

In short, the Frankfurt School of critical theory is today constituted by lively debates, discussed more below, about how to deploy various critical methods ([Section 2](#)) and concepts ([Section 3](#)) while remaining attuned to social struggles and crises ([Section 4](#)) and positioning itself in relation to critical theories developed out of other traditions.

2. Critical Methods

Frankfurt School critical theory is best characterized by a set of methodological aspirations that set it apart from many other forms of social and political theorizing (both in philosophy and the social sciences): It aspires to be (1) *self-reflexive*, accounting for its own embeddedness in specific social and historical conditions, (2) *interdisciplinary*, integrating philosophical analysis with social theory and empirical social research, (3) *materialist*, grounding critical theorizing in social reality, and (4) *emancipatory*, orienting itself toward the goal of social emancipation. These commitments situate the Frankfurt School firmly in the Marxist tradition, and that tradition's aim of overcoming the division between theory and practice without uncritically subsuming one under the other.

This has given rise to three interrelated methodological challenges: how to conceptualize (1) the relation of theory to social reality, (2) the role and standpoint of critical theorists, and (3) the normative foundations, content, or force of their critical theorizing. In light of historical developments in the first half of the twentieth century – the rise of fascism and Stalinism and the integration of the working class into the liberal welfare state – Frankfurt School theorists lost confidence in an identifiable direction of history or an identifiable collective subject like the proletariat to lead the way. It became increasingly unclear how to uphold a link between their theories and a pre-theoretical anchor within social reality – such as oppositional experiences, forms of consciousness, practices of resistance, or social struggles and movements – or even to see how the conditions for any of those things to emerge were present at all.

Against this backdrop, this section first sketches the common ground most Frankfurt School theorists find in the approach of immanent critique (§2.1) before tracing the various ways in which they have sought normative foundations (§2.2) in a more or less constructive or reconstructive (§2.3) register, then turns to methods such as disclosive and genealogical critique that are critical of those normative approaches (§2.4), and concludes by outlining a set of methodological challenges that shape contemporary debates (§2.5).

2.1 Immanent Critique

In responding to the three-pronged methodological challenge of relating theory to social reality, reflecting on the standpoint of critique, and spelling out its normativity, Frankfurt School critical theory moves beyond the usual juxtaposition between internal and external critique. Frankfurt School theorists rely on a third model of critique, which builds on Hegel and Marx and is often understood as immanent or reconstructive. Critique proceeds immanently or reconstructively when it seeks to secure its normative resources and epistemic standpoint from the (often implicit) normative structures and epistemic possibilities of the practices and self-understandings that are constitutive of the (type of) society in question. Immanent critique avoids the dichotomy between an internal critique that refers to standards and standpoints that are already recognized by those criticized and an external critique that refers to standards and standpoints that are not (or not yet) recognized and therefore have to be derived independently from the agents' perspective and their social context (see Jaeggi 2005, 2014, Celikates 2009, Stahl 2013a). Critical theory understood in this way is both grounded in social reality as it exists and emancipatory in seeking to radically transform this reality.

The critique of ideology can both serve as a paradigmatic example of immanent critique in this sense and illustrate some of the challenges this model faces (Ng 2015). Ideology critique is immanent insofar as it starts from the contradictions of a social and ideological constellation and the experience of those affected, which is shaped by these contradictions. It does not criticize an ideological form of consciousness because it is immoral or unethical, but because of its epistemic, functional, and genetic features, i.e. for being false or distorted, for contributing to the reproduction of relations of domination, and for arising from within such relations in ways that are relatively immune to self-reflection. Consequently, the critique of ideology does not focus primarily on the injustice or domination found in society, but on the forms of consciousness, culture, practice, habit, and affect that make this injustice or domination seem natural or unavoidable (Jaeggi 2008). On this view, any critical theory that aims at emancipation must first aim at diagnosing and overcoming those obstacles that keep agents from fully experiencing, critically reflecting on, and collectively acting against the unjust and dominating conditions under which they live. The question is how critical theorists can do so without falling back into epistemologically and politically problematic distinctions between false and true consciousness, between ideology and scientific insight, and between true ("objective") and false ("purely subjective") interests and needs (Celikates 2006; see [Section 3.3](#) below).

These challenges are among the many challenges critical theorists face in developing an immanent critique that is linked to social reality and practice, a link that comes out in two ways. First, theory is anchored in social reality in terms of its genesis, as it is shaped by the social context from which it emerges. Second, theory aims at a practice that transforms social reality. This dual commitment to linking theory and practice is spelled out in two rather different ways, both in the history of the Frankfurt School and in contemporary discussions. One way of anchoring theory in social reality – call it the crisis approach – starts with social contradictions, antagonisms, and crises, along with the practical challenges and conflicts that result, and maintains that identifying those conflicts requires socio-theoretical analysis and sociological research (Jaeggi 2017a, Fraser and Jaeggi 2018). A second way of anchoring theory in social reality – call it the struggles approach – takes social struggles and movements and the practices of critique and resistance of oppressed groups as its starting point. This approach incorporates alternative standpoints and counter-hegemonic epistemologies into its theorizing with the aim of countering the potentially disempowering and anti-emancipatory effects that arise when critical theorists view crises mainly in terms of structural contradictions while ignoring or underestimating the ways that social and political movements themselves can produce and intensify crises (Collins 2019, Celikates 2022).

While this distinction between crisis and struggle is useful for heuristic purposes, it should not be overstated. Most critical theorists share a commitment to the emancipatory role of theory as well as an immanent anchoring of theory in social reality, whether qua crises or struggles. The distinction is a matter of degree and starting points, and it is usually agreed that crises and struggles stand in need of mutual articulation (see Benhabib 1986, 123–133, and [Section 4.1](#) and [Section 4.2](#) below).

Horkheimer maintained that a critical theory should not have an external relation to, but must enter into a “dynamic unity” with, practice, so that it is “not merely an expression of the concrete historical situation but also a force within it to stimulate change” (1937a [1972: 215], see also Marcuse 1937, Horkheimer 1937b). But under social conditions that neutralize social struggles or turn them into regressive backlash movements, the “dynamic unity” envisaged by Horkheimer can appear foreclosed. Even for Adorno, whose diagnosis of the “totally administered world” is the most radical example of this foreclosure, however, it would be a mistake to conceptualize existing society as a perfectly closed, monolithic, and functionally integrated self-reproducing totality. Rather, even when society is viewed as a totality, it has to be understood not in terms of homogeneity or frozen stability but in terms of structural antagonisms (Adorno 1957 [1976, 77]), conflict, and process (Adorno 1966b), i.e. as riddled with contradictions that, at least in principle, allow for forms of oppositional experience, consciousness, or practice that a critical theory can build on. In one of his last texts written shortly before his death, Adorno concludes that “critical theory is not aiming at totality, but criticizes it. This also means, however, that it is, in its substance, anti-totalitarian, with the utmost political determination” (Adorno 1969a; our translation). Even – or especially – in the face of the closure of political space, the political significance of a critical theory can consist in safeguarding the link between theory and the possibility of a radically different practice. At the same time, this defense of the relation to practice needs to be complemented by a defense of theory in the face of what Adorno identified as an “actionist” and anti-theoretical ideology of “pseudo-activity” in arguing that “praxis without theory, lagging behind the most advanced state of cognition, cannot but fail, and praxis, in keeping with its own concept, would like to succeed” (Adorno 1969b [1998, 265]).

2.2 Normative Foundations for Critique

Despite this more nuanced reading of Adorno on the relation between theory and practice, the broader diagnosis – put forth in different guises by Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse – that social integration, the pacification of class conflict, and the internalization of conformist attitudes had robbed critical theory of any pre-theoretical anchor, provides an important background for Habermas’s break with the first generation. That break concerns not only their “pessimism,” but the basic methodological and substantial premises of their theories. In Habermas’s view, the first generation had navigated themselves into a dead end with their totalizing diagnosis of an all-encompassing state of delusion dominated by instrumental rationality. In response, and in order to provide firm normative foundations for critical theory, Habermas advocates a “communicative turn,” reformulating social critique in terms of a critique of the conditions of communication and grounding it in the normative content presupposed within the practice of linguistically mediated social interaction and argumentation.

This element of normative validity – as opposed to merely factual social validity that is forced, imposed, or presupposed – is elaborated in Habermas’s discourse theory, originally referred to as “discourse ethics” (Habermas 1983a, Ch. 4) but later evolving into a differentiated approach that distinguishes between ethical and moral norms (Habermas 1991) and a discourse theory of law and democracy (Habermas 1992). At the heart of discourse theory is a principle of discursive justification that Habermas refers to as the “discourse principle” or “D,” which states: “just those norms of action are valid if all persons affected could agree as participants in rational discourse” (Habermas 1992 [1996, 107]). He further specifies discourse theory with a universalization principle (“U”) that is operative when arguing about moral norms, and a democratic principle that is operative when attempting to justify legal norms within a democratic society. Habermas does not naively suggest that actually existing discourses correspond to these ideals, but maintains that in those discourses participants necessarily make idealizing presuppositions that can then be used to identify and criticize the shortcomings of actual discourse as distorted by interests, power relations, and ideologies.

As a response to the challenges of immanent critique outlined above, Habermas’s work can be understood in terms of a “dialectics of immanence and transcendence” (Cooke 2006, Ch. 3). Habermas maintains the need to situate reason historically and within social reality – the largely Hegelian, pragmatist, or reconstructive element of his thought. But the idealizations that are immanent in our linguistic practices point toward context-transcending validity claims that must be defended in a discursive procedure – the Kantian or constructivist element in his thought. Habermas now refers to his attempt to “de-transcendentalize Kant” as a form of “Kantian pragmatism” (Habermas 1999; see also Bernstein 2010, Ch. 8; Baynes 2016, Ch. 4; Flynn 2014b).

Some interpretations of Habermas stress that his theory of communicative action is still a form of immanent critique (Finlayson 2007, Stahl 2013b) while others object to his increasingly Kantian focus on moral norms (Heath 2014). To provide empirical confirmation of his rational reconstruction of the “moral point of view,” further situating it within social reality, Habermas drew on Kohlberg’s developmental moral psychology, itself decidedly Kantian in its defining the highest stage of moral development in terms of the ability to make universalizable moral judgements (Habermas 1983a, Ch. 4; for a critique, see Benhabib 1992, Chs. 5–6, which, drawing on Carol Gilligan’s critique of Kohlberg, distinguishes a “generalized other” from a “concrete other” whose experience cannot be accounted for by abstract conceptions of the moral standpoint).

Habermas's shift toward a Kantian position is particularly evident in the Rawls-Habermas debate (Habermas 1995a, Rawls 1995, Habermas 1996), widely viewed as a "family quarrel" among two Kantian political philosophers. In his early work on discourse ethics, Habermas compared his own principle (U) to Rawls's "original position," arguing that his approach was the better way to "operationalize" the moral point of view as a form of moral constructivism that tests moral norms in a discursive procedure posited as a dialogical alternative to Kant's categorical imperative (Habermas 1991). The debate shifted in the 1990s with their contributions to legal-political constructivism: Rawls's *Political Liberalism* (1993) and Habermas's *Between Facts and Norms* (1992), in which he provides a rational reconstruction of the institutions of constitutional democracy. In that context, Habermas argues that Rawls's approach is not transcendent enough, since in Habermas's view Rawls reduces normative validity to the notion of reasonableness immanent within liberal democratic societies (for the implications of their debate for multiple issues in moral and political philosophy, see Hedrick 2010, Baynes 2016, Chs. 6–7, and Finlayson 2019).

Habermas's Kantian turn also came to the fore when extending his work in a cosmopolitan or "post-national" direction (beginning with Habermas 1995b), even if he has continued to combine a Kantian approach to justifying universal norms with a wide-ranging analysis of the empirical phenomena of globalization (1998). This combination of normative and empirical theorizing, a hallmark of the Frankfurt School, is present in a range of work by other critical theorists addressing global issues (Ingram 2019, Ibsen 2023), from the challenge of disaggregating citizenship from the nation-state (Benhabib 2004) to transnationalizing the public sphere (Fraser et al. 2014), and theorizing new forms of transnational democracy (Bohman 2007). Rather than simply defending abstract cosmopolitan norms, such approaches typically aim at some form of critical cosmopolitanism (Milstein 2015), with some stressing the crucial role of political contestation of allegedly universal norms "from below" (J. Ingram 2013) or of concrete struggles for rights as part of a broadly construed intercultural dialogue on human rights (Flynn 2014a).

In light of Habermas's turn to Kant, a significant focus of debate among Habermasians and interpreters of Habermas has been the status of idealizing presuppositions and the ultimate status of the principles of justification within discourse theory. Defenders of discourse theory can be divided up into those who focus more on immanence – pointing in a Hegelian, pragmatist, contextualist, or reconstructive direction – and those who focus more on transcendence – pointing in a Kantian or constructivist direction. Among the former, some argue, echoing Hegel's critique of Kant, that Habermas should situate reason more thoroughly within its social and historical context in order to avoid an overly rationalistic, abstract, or gendered approach (Benhabib 1986, 1992), while others have argued for Habermas to embrace a more pragmatist (McCarthy 1991, Bernstein 2010) or contextualist approach (Rorty 1985, Allen 2008, Ch. 6). Habermas's most recent work (2019) attempts a kind of middle path, going in a decidedly historical direction by tracing the provincial, European origins of his "post-metaphysical" mode of theorizing as a preparatory stage to a fully inclusive, global intercultural dialogue as the way to establish its universal validity in a world characterized by "multiple modernities" (see Forst 2021b, Chambers 2022, and Flynn 2022 for critical assessments).

Those who have taken discourse theory in a more Kantian or transcendental direction include Habermas's long-time interlocutor Karl Otto-Apel, who argued that the dynamic of universal validity claims in practices of argumentation transcendently presupposes an ideal communication community from which universal normative foundations for the assessment of discourses can be derived (Apel 1985). Apel maintained that grounding reason, and thereby critique, requires a more transcendental justification (or "ultimate grounding") than Habermas has provided (Apel 1989; see Habermas's most recent reply to Apel in 2005, Ch. 3).

More recently, Rainer Forst has embraced Kantian constructivism in positing that every human being has a "right to justification," a right to demand reciprocal and general reasons for the practices, institutions, and structures that affect them (Forst 2007). Forst views moral and political constructivism as distinct, but integrated stages. While the task of moral constructivism is to construct a list of basic moral rights that cannot be reasonably rejected, those abstract rights must be given concrete content by citizens in a process of political constructivism. He maintains that his approach is immanent insofar as the right to justification is "recursively grounded" by reconstructing the validity claims implicit in all morally justified claims, while maintaining a moment of transcendence since the right to justification can be justifiably claimed in any context. Forst views this as the normative core of a critical theory that understands society as an ensemble of practices of justification. In that sense, the concept of justification is both descriptive (referring to actual arguments given within a particular social order) and normative (referring to reasons that could or should be accepted), and Forst maintains both perspectives are needed for a critique of existing justification narratives and relations of justification (see the Introductions to Forst 2011 and 2021a).

Various critics of Habermas have argued that his normative turn and shift to Kant risks transforming critical theory into something that looks increasingly like a liberal theory of justice. They posit alternative approaches such as reconstructive, disclosive, and genealogical critique that also return to questions and arguments developed by the first generation.

2.3 Reconstructive Critique

Those who subscribe to the model of *reconstructive critique* emphasize the downsides of uncoupling normative argument from social analysis and social theory. In Axel Honneth's work, this shift takes two forms. In his earlier work (1992), he argues that the relatively narrow rationalist focus on communicative reason occludes more fundamental and often prelinguistic experiences and

intersubjective relations that give rise to struggles for recognition and that his Hegel-inspired theory is better able to articulate, thus reestablishing the link between theory and social reality in more substantial ways. Relatedly, Honneth insists that critical theory can be distinguished from other normative enterprises by its reference to “the pretheoretical resource in which its own critical viewpoint is anchored extra-theoretically as an empirical interest or moral experience” (Honneth 1994 [2007, 63–64]).

Expanding on this earlier commitment, in his later work Honneth argues against the division of theoretical labor in which (constructivist) philosophy engages in normative theorizing while empirical sociology investigates our social reality (2011). By contrast, he undertakes a “normative reconstruction” of how modern society – its legal, moral, political as well as social and economic practices and institutions – came to be centered around individual freedom as the highest value of this cultural formation. Honneth wants to show that we can only gain an adequate theoretical understanding of, and critical perspective on, modern society if we analyze its different social spheres as attempts to institutionalize the value of freedom. In contrast to both revolutionary and conservative approaches, he wants to show that the structure of this institutionalization allows for a progressive realization of the value of freedom as social actors appeal to the constitutive idea of freedom to challenge the concrete forms of unfreedom that remain characteristic of our social reality.

Similar to Honneth methodologically, Rahel Jaeggi argues, in her reconstructive approach to the critique of forms of life, that bracketing the question of how to rationally evaluate and criticize forms of life as a whole, as Rawlsians do in the name of liberal neutrality and Habermasians in the name of “ethical abstinence,” ends up hindering precisely the kind of experimental learning processes that are crucial for forms of life to remain dynamic and avoid stagnation and failure (2014 [2018, 9–24, 318–319]). But Jaeggi places a greater emphasis on contradictions, crises, and conflicts than the later Honneth (see also Schaub 2015).

The approaches of both Honneth and Jaeggi exemplify a conception of immanent critique that closely links analysis and critique, issuing in a critique that is neither a mere description of what exists nor a normative demand imposed on what exists from the outside. Accordingly, it does not proceed in a free-standing, normative way, but relies on a specific combination of philosophical reflection and social-theoretical as well as empirical research that is grounded in social developments and crises and actual social experiences and self-understandings. This methodological reorientation has also led to a more substantial engagement with questions of the economy and the sphere of work, both from a more Durkheim-inspired (Honneth 2022, 2023, Celikates, Honneth, and Jaeggi 2023) and a more Marx-inspired (Fraser 2022) position that has also resulted in a fundamental (non-reformist) critique of capitalism (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018).

2.4 Disclosive Critique, Genealogy, and the Critique of Normativity

While these approaches seek to develop a socially grounded form of normativity, critics argue that they are still too idealizing in their understanding of social reality and its historical genesis, as well as too normative in their methods from the point of view of yet another model of critique, which has been called disclosive or genealogical.

Disclosive critique typically takes its cue from Adorno (and sometimes other theoretical sources from Heidegger to contemporary aesthetics), moving beyond the dichotomy between literary world-disclosure and philosophical reason-giving or the quest for normative foundations. On this view, critique has the task of revealing the world in a new and different light, disclosing unrecognized suffering and intricate forms of domination that are not only occluded by dominant ideologies but also shape the norms that emanate from that order in ways that escape more strongly normative versions of immanent critique that build on them. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can be read as an exercise in disclosive critique that seeks to defamiliarize the social world for its readers and thereby break open their unquestioned acceptance of how things appear to them (Honneth 1998).

This negative orientation of disclosive critique can be complemented by a more positive one, in which what is disclosed also involves potentialities and horizons that have no space or way to articulate themselves within the existing social and normative order. Walter Benjamin’s writings on the radical potential of mass culture or Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) can be seen as examples of disclosive critique that involve both the disruption of established and the experimental opening up of new experiences and schemas (Vogelmann 2016).

Some critical theorists attempt to integrate a more positive idea of disclosure into critical theory while maintaining that this is not at odds with expanded conceptions of normativity. Some draw on Heidegger to develop an account of world-disclosive critique that rethinks reason and agency, stressing receptivity and “self-decentering” as an alternative model to Habermas’s focus on procedural reason (Kompridis 2006). Others stress that while disclosure can and must be subject to intersubjective validation through argumentation, critical theory must have recourse to the disclosive power of imagination, which is revealed in the force of exemplarity (Ferrara 2008), in focusing attention on the aesthetic dimension of narratives that social movements use to imagine alternative possibilities (Lara 1998, 2021), or in the way that powerful representations of the good society function to disclose a transcendent object that cannot be fully known or represented but can nonetheless provide ethical orientation (Cooke 2006). In a variety of different ways, these approaches attempt to maintain the utopian dimension of critique (Marcuse 1937).

Genealogical critique, by contrast, can be seen as a form of disclosive critique that is more focused on problematizing, unmasking, and disrupting (Saar 2002, Koopman 2013). Given its association with Nietzsche and Foucault, it also has a distinct trajectory, set of methodological commitments, and theoretical implications. Taking aim at social practices, self-understandings, identities and normative commitments that are seen as natural or accepted as given, genealogical critique traces their historical emergence, highlighting their contingency and denaturalizing them with the aim of opening up the possibility of thinking and acting differently. From this perspective, the search for normative foundations is misguided as it both underestimates how normativity is shaped by unacknowledged histories and power relations and overestimates the transformative power of a normative critique that appeals to reason alone. Genealogical critique, by contrast, seeks to destabilize and decenter the subject and its fundamental commitments (Owen 2002, Hoy and McCarthy 1994; for a version of this claim that builds on psychoanalytic theory, see Allen 2021, Ch. 5).

While earlier engagements with genealogical critique, especially Foucault's, were marked by criticisms of his supposed rejection of all normative and rational standards, lack of social theorizing, and relativism (Habermas 1985, Chs. IX-X, Fraser 1981, Dews 1987), more recently critical theorists have sought to emphasize the potential convergence and mutual illumination of genealogy and Frankfurt School critical theory in providing an analysis of the workings of contemporary forms of power and domination (Allen 2008, Koopman 2013, Ch. 7, Saar 2018). At the same time, a recent debate between Forst and Wendy Brown exemplifies how the earlier split between Habermas and Foucault is rearticulated today, with Forst taking a broadly Habermasian position in arguing that his "respect conception of tolerance" manages to safeguard the autonomy of individuals by grounding toleration in the right to justification, and Brown insisting, with Foucault, on the normalizing, disciplining, and depoliticizing effects of liberal discourses of toleration that ultimately obfuscate the complex operations of social power (Brown and Forst 2014, see also Vogelmann 2021).

A genealogical orientation also characterizes postcolonial critiques of Frankfurt School critical theory that point out the lack of explicit and sustained engagement with European colonialism and imperialism and its legacies, including contemporary forms of racism, and the ways in which these have enabled and shaped the processes of "modernization" and thus the formation of "modern" societies, subjects, and forms of knowledge and rationality, all of which critical theorists purport to investigate critically (see [§4.1.3](#) below).

2.5 Current Challenges

Exponents of genealogical critique and struggle-centered approaches problematize forms of immanent or reconstructive critique that take institutional achievements as their starting point, challenging them by excavating the histories of domination and repression, as well as struggles, that have constituted these institutions and continue to shape their functioning. This gives rise to numerous challenges that continue to animate methodological debates in critical theory: (1) how (or even whether) to defend the putative normative achievements of liberal democracies, and if those are to be defended as achievements, then (2) how to theorize about the relation between struggles, crises, and institutional achievements, in contexts that may involve either (3) an absence of struggles, or (4), the opposite problem, a proliferation and fragmentation of struggles:

1.

From the perspective of genealogical and post-colonial critique, the commitment to the institutions of the modern liberal nation-state (Habermas 1992, Honneth 2011) relies on an idealizing view of the history and present of this political formation that ignores, or treats as historically contingent and philosophically inconsequential, the forms of domination and exclusion that have accompanied it. At a time when the putative institutional achievements of liberal democracies – such as the separation of powers, the independence of the judiciary, the integrity of elections, or the protection of fundamental rights, especially for minorities – have come under attack from right-wing and neo-authoritarian movements and governments, the question is how critical theorists can defend the normative achievements of the existing order despite its systemic shortcomings. Offering a more radical challenge, some critical race theorists and post-colonial critics argue that those shortcomings reveal that what were thought to be normative achievements were historically premised on, and continue to functionally presuppose, domination and exclusion both at a societal and global level (see [§4.1.2](#) and [§4.1.3](#) below). On a methodological level, this involves the challenge of revising or going beyond the normative and sociological categories of critical theory that seem, at least in part, to be tied to a specifically Western experience.

2.

3.

Many critical theorists who accept the claim that these are normative achievements insist that a more complex view of the relation between institutions, struggles, and crises is necessary. As mentioned above, an alternative strand within critical theory that reaches from Negt and Kluge's recovery of proletarian counterpublics through Fraser's theorization

of feminist movements to current attempts to reconnect critical theory with the struggles of our age, has insisted that abstracting from collective movements and struggles and relocating the emancipatory potential in the normative achievements of the existing institutional order risks underestimating how institutional dynamics, the inherent crisis tendencies of (more or less) liberal democracies, and social struggles are inextricably intertwined. Beyond a merely historical and social-theoretical point, how this question is answered will also affect how to conceptualize the role of emancipatory as opposed to regressive struggles in the face of the new authoritarianism (see [§4.2.3](#) below).

4.

5.

More abstractly, critical theorists must account for situations in which there seem to be no struggles or forms of critical consciousness to latch onto, or only highly constrained forms of them. How can a critical theory respond to a situation in which domination is more or less total and has managed to suppress any critical consciousness and practice? Some of Marcuse's descriptions of contemporary society come closest to this scenario. One might respond that "a society of happy slaves, genuinely content with their chains," a society in which domination is experienced not as domination but as freedom, might be the critical theorists' nightmare, but it "is a nightmare, not a realistic view of a state of society which is at present possible" (Geuss 1981, 83–84). Nevertheless, the challenge points to a dilemma critical theorists need to navigate. On the one hand, a critical theory requires a starting point in the forms of consciousness, experience, and practice of its addressees, but, on the other hand, critical theory should respond to and address distortions and blockages of precisely these forms of consciousness, experience, and practice. While these distortions and blockages will in most cases turn out to be partial rather than total and thus allow for some form of problematization to emerge (Celikates 2009, Part III), it seems equally important to not simply tie a critical theory to already existing social movements and thus to "goals that have already been publicly articulated" since this "neglects the everyday, still unthematized, but no less pressing embryonic form of social misery and moral injustice" (Honneth 2003, 114; see also Renault 2004, 2008).

6.

7.

The opposite problem can arise when critical theorists diagnose a proliferation of social struggles and lines of conflict beyond the classic antagonism of labor and capital. After the demise of the kind of philosophy of history that identified the proletariat as the revolutionary subject and the workers' movement as the emancipatory force to which critical theory could and should attach itself, it has become unclear how critical theorists can determine with which of the different emancipatory movements of their day to enter into the kind of alliance envisaged by Marx and Horkheimer and which "forms of existing social critique" or "experiences of injustice" to pick up on. This difficulty is not only due to the plurality – or intersectionality – of movements, practices of critique, and experiences of injustice, but also due to the fact that struggles are often far from perfectly aligned and can operate at cross-purposes, with regard to both their aims and their methods. In answering this challenge, critical theorists can neither simply deduce the "correct" struggle from some overarching laws of historical development (the pole of determinism), nor claim that theorists simply have to decide which struggle or movement to link their theory to (the pole of voluntarism).

8.

Insofar as critical theory is committed to immanent critique, focusing on the internal contradictions and crises of a specific social order and the struggles and movements that arise from within it, these challenges cannot be easily resolved. Rather than seeking to resolve them at an abstract level, they could instead be viewed as opening up a field of tensions that critical theorists need to navigate within the specific constellation they find themselves in. While critical theory needs to be anchored in actually existing forms of theoretical as well as practical critique, in the social struggles that people actually engage in, it also has the task of articulating the experiences of those who are blocked from engaging in struggles of their own and of contributing to the further theoretical articulation of existing struggles. At times, critical theory may need "to push beyond the 'subjective' elements of struggle and languages of claims-making to the more 'objective' dimensions of contradictions and crises, which turn more on the dynamics of systemic elements operating independently of whether or not people actually thematize them via struggle" (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018, 11), without losing sight of the epistemic and political risks this involves.

In addressing these risks, one way forward has been to embrace methodological pluralism and to understand critical theory less as a comprehensive social theory and more as a critical practice, as something critics do (Bohman 2003, Kompridis 2006, Celikates 2019a). This approach can more

systematically incorporate alternative standpoints and epistemologies and the practices of epistemic resistance they are tied to, and more easily build on other traditions and paradigms of critical theory, such as feminist, anti-colonial, and anti-racist struggles and theorizing (Mills 1988, Collins 1990, 2019, Medina 2013, Loick 2021, Celikates 2022; see [Section 4.1](#) below). Anchoring the perspective of critical theory within the social struggles and epistemic standpoints of the oppressed can serve as a counterweight – in the sense of “reflexive accountability” (Collins 2019) – to the tendency of actually existing critical theories to set in motion a disempowering spiral of epistemic asymmetries that denies the existence of theoretically sophisticated practices of critique and resistance on the ground and thereby reproduces existing obstacles to equal participation in knowledge production and to radical social transformation. On this view, critical theorizing is itself a social practice that recognizes its addressees as equal partners in a dialogical struggle for appropriate interpretations and realization of transformative potentials that is informed by social theory and sociological research. As such, it can make use of a variety of critical methods – reconstructive, constructive, disclosive, or genealogical (Freyenhagen 2018) – that are not easily subsumed under one unified metatheoretical framework, even if they can be seen as various attempts to spell out the idea of a critical theory as self-reflexive, interdisciplinary, materialist, and emancipatory.

3. Critical Concepts

The basic concepts of Frankfurt School critical theory – such as alienation, reification, ideology, but also emancipation – are expressive of the specific methodology, or set of methodologies, that critical theorists in this tradition employ. As explained in the previous section, critical theory in this tradition proceeds in an immanent way, and this implies that its concepts are both developed from within a certain social constellation and seek to go beyond the self-understanding characteristic of this constellation, they are both descriptive and evaluative, and they exemplify the unity of analysis and critique inherited from Marx. While some concepts are primarily “anticipatory-utopian” (like emancipation) and others primarily “explanatory-diagnostic” (like alienation, reification, and ideology, as obstacles to emancipation) (Benhabib 1986), they are all “thick concepts” whose descriptive content is irreducibly social-theoretically as well as evaluatively loaded.

In addition, some of the critical concepts developed by Frankfurt School authors – again alienation, reification and ideology are the clearest examples – point to second-order phenomena. In contrast to substantial first-order injustices, these concepts seek to critically diagnose what happens when unjust (or exploitative or oppressive) social relations are not experienced as unjust (or exploitative or oppressive) but are accepted as legitimate or natural, or if they are intuitively experienced but not explicitly recognized as such, or recognized but not adequately interpreted and articulated. These concepts pick out social phenomena that are often ignored by more mainstream approaches in moral and political philosophy that focus on the moral status of the individual and their actions, or the legitimacy of institutional arrangements, to the neglect of the domain of the social, with its distinct structure, dynamics, and challenges (see, e.g., Honneth 2000, Ch. 1, Zürn 2011, Neuhauser 2022, Ch. 1). The following subsections introduce four key concepts that exemplify both the critical methodologies discussed in the previous section and the substantial social-theoretical and diagnostic contributions to our understanding of contemporary society that Frankfurt School critical theory aspires to. There are of course other concepts used by critical theorists – from normativity, justice, and autonomy to power, domination, and oppression – but the focus here is on concepts less widely discussed in other traditions or to which Frankfurt School theorists have made distinctive contributions.

3.1 Alienation

The concept of alienation has a long history within critical theory. The basic concept refers to the idea of humans being separated, estranged, or distanced from something crucial to their freedom or capacity to flourish. One is alienated when one has a distorted or deficient relation to oneself or to the natural or social world. Critical theorists face a number of challenges in developing a critique of alienation. Classic critiques of alienation, Rousseau and the early Marx for example, relied on substantive conceptions of human nature or self-realization to ground their diagnoses and provide standards for critique. Thick accounts of human nature are less compelling today, which means contemporary critics of alienation have pursued alternative approaches. Since a critique of alienation attempts to diagnose a social pathology, not a problem with particular individuals, critical theorists must also provide a social theory that can convincingly diagnose the social causes of, and possible paths for overcoming, alienation.

Rousseau can be credited with inaugurating “social philosophy” as a domain of inquiry while developing a critique of alienation (Honneth 2000, Ch. 1). Although he does not refer to alienation in his “Second Discourse” (1755), the term captures his argument that living in society leaves human beings disconnected from their true desires and passions, which he explored by speculating about what humans would have been like in a state of nature. Within Hegelian and Marxist social criticism, the concept of alienation has been used to capture the idea that something produced by humans is wrongly taken by them as something given or outside their conscious control (Jaeggi 2005 [2014, 13–14]). In his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Hegel first develops a concept of alienation to describe the relation of the human mind to reality when the products of human reason are not recognized as our own creation but are instead experienced as alien forces. In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), Marx analyzed how wage labor within capitalist societies causes alienation. Workers produce a world of objects, but the products of their labor as well as their own productive activity are commodities over which they have no control; the world they create becomes an alien

power with increasing control over them. They are alienated from the kind of spontaneous and creative productive activity that Marx, in his early work, posits as the essence of human nature.

The concept of alienation was influential among first-generation Frankfurt School theorists, particularly in the work of Marcuse and the later work of Erich Fromm (1961). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno echo Rousseau in telling a story of alienation going back to the dawn of civilization. They maintain that human beings, in their quest to dominate the natural world (external nature) and to acquire mastery over themselves (inner nature), become estranged from both aspects of nature, failing to see what Enlightenment denies: that we are fundamentally natural beings (Vogel 1996, 69).

Contemporary critical theorists have attempted to rejuvenate the concept of alienation without relying on overly substantive accounts of human nature and without the totalizing diagnosis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Rahel Jaeggi formalizes key elements of the Hegelian-Marxist approach in developing a philosophical account of alienation focused on how failure to adequately appropriate oneself or the world results in a “relation of relationlessness” (2005). In this way, the non-alienated self is not defined by a substantive conception of human nature but by the quality of one’s relation to the world: whether this relation is sustained by successful processes of appropriation. Hartmut Rosa also defines alienation as a distorted relation to the world but with a more substantive approach to the quality of non-alienated relations to the world. For this, he has developed a multifaceted concept of “resonance” to capture a kind of vibrant or responsive relation to the world by contrast with the alienated experience of the world as ossified, mute, or hostile (2016). In contrast to these approaches, which are largely framed in terms of necessary conditions for living a good life, Rainer Forst has argued that deontological aspects of the critique of alienation have been neglected, and that there is a kind of “noumenal alienation” that results from not being recognized, or failing to recognize oneself, as an agent of justification (2017).

3.2 Reification

Reification is a concept with close ties to alienation. If alienation is viewed as diagnosing a distorted relation to the world, reification can be understood as one way of articulating the form that distortion can take. In the broadest sense, reification is a term used to critique cases in which some entity that should not be viewed as an object – oneself, other people, or some segment of the social or natural world – is treated as a thing-like object. It is instrumentalized, objectified, or quantified in a way that is inappropriate according to some critical standard. One challenge for critical theorists is articulating the standard or perspective – a non-reified relation or perspective – according to which the reified stance is not appropriate.

Georg Lukács’s classic 1923 essay on reification heavily influenced the Frankfurt School. Lukács combined Marx’s analysis of the “fetishism of commodities” – which causes social relations between human beings to appear as quantifiable and thing-like – with Weber’s analysis of bureaucracy – which extends this instrumentalizing attitude to all social domains. Reification becomes “the necessary, immediate reality of every person living in capitalist society” (1923 [1971, 197]), which can refer to an instrumentalizing attitude taken toward objects (whose qualitative feature are reduced to quantitative terms), other people, and features of one’s own personality when viewed solely from the perspective of their marketability.

Different critical theorists have appealed to the concept of reification to capture similar but not identical phenomena, with differing definitions corresponding to differences in the larger theoretical framework in which they deploy the concept. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the concept captures the dominance of instrumental reason and the totally administered world that results (1947). Habermas reinterpreted the concept to describe the ways in which systems such as the economy and the bureaucratic state, which function properly as spheres in which instrumental rationality dominates, extend too far into spheres of everyday life that he refers to as the lifeworld (1981). This “colonization” of the lifeworld by the system results in the communicative structures of the lifeworld becoming reified. Honneth, by contrast, takes up the concept of reification in relation to his theory of recognition, arguing that reification involves a kind of forgetting of a primary relation of mutual recognition that he calls “empathetic engagement” (2005). Within Rosa’s theory of resonance, in which he attempts to capture one side of the history of modernity as a “catastrophe of resonance,” reification can be viewed as a “forgetfulness of resonance” (2016 [2019, 325]). The revival of this concept has been extended in other ways by using reification as a guiding concept for analyzing the relation between economics and subject formation within a “political economy of the senses” (Chari 2015) or pairing reification with a suitably modified notion of reconciliation to assess experiences of exclusion and integration within modern social orders (Hedrick 2019).

3.3 Ideology

Ideology is similar to alienation and reification in being both a concept critical theory inherits from the Marxist tradition and one that is used to identify a distorted relationship to the world and one’s own place in it (Eagleton 1991). In the Marxist tradition, it has played a prominent role in answering questions such as why people accept social and political conditions that seem to be contrary to their own interests, or how it is possible that subjects feel free although they are dominated. When people experience and describe relations of exploitation and domination as natural and without alternative or even as just, this seems to be an effect of ideology. Ideology, on this critical understanding, usually denotes a more or less coherent system of action-guiding beliefs, such as liberal individualism, that is said to obscure social reality – especially power relations, crisis tendencies, and social conflicts. As

Marx (1844, 1846, 1867) and subsequent critical theorists argue, by obscuring these, ideology contributes to the reproduction of the prevailing order (Rosen 1996). Accordingly, any radically transformative and emancipatory practice presupposes that this ideological obfuscation must be recognized as such, criticized, and overcome. The challenge to such critical reflection is particularly acute when the possibility of even asking questions about how we might want to live, if we could transform society, is occluded by a technocratic ideology that reframes such practical questions as technical problems with narrow solutions (Habermas 1963, 1968a).

Ideology differs from mere deception, propaganda, or conspiracy theories. Because it is structurally anchored in social reality and plays a functional role for its reproduction, it cannot be explained with reference to the individual psyche or manipulation by others alone. Even if false consciousness is an element of ideology, critical theorists from Adorno to Jaeggi emphasize the practical nature of ideology as it shapes identities, is embedded in social practice, and functions via affects and habitus.

According to one influential interpretation, the critical notion of ideology developed in the Frankfurt School is characterized by three dimensions (Geuss 1981, Jaeggi 2008). In the first, epistemic dimension, ideologies always encompass epistemically deficient beliefs and attitudes that can range from substantially false beliefs to the confusion of particular and universal interests and inadequate concepts (such as “illegal alien” to refer to undocumented immigrants). In the second, functional dimension, ideologies are seen as playing a necessary, or at least supporting, role for the stabilization and legitimation of social relations of domination, i.e. for their more or less smooth reproduction. In the third, genetic dimension, ideologies are shaped, in ways that are not transparent to the agents themselves, by the social conditions under which they emerge, so that it is not an accident that people end up with the specific sets of beliefs they end up with in a specific type of society.

Radicalizing the Marxist notion of ideology as “necessarily false consciousness,” i.e. consciousness that is false (and not simply morally problematic) for structural reasons (and not just accidentally), Adorno and Marcuse often seem to argue that ideology reaches into the innermost core of subjects, who are shaped all the way down to their psychological and physical impulses, leading them to affirm the existing order and thereby preempting any resistance to domination. While this might help explain the resilience of ideology and its continued effectiveness, it also poses the challenge for critical theorists to find an anchor for their critique in the forms of consciousness, experience, and practice of its addressees (Celikates 2006, and [Section 2.5](#) above).

Due to its emancipatory orientation, the critique of ideology must connect up with the self-understanding of those affected by trying to initiate learning processes, which in turn are supposed to lead to a transformation of those social conditions that are hidden behind ideologies. At the same time, without recourse to critical theories agents themselves will often continue to face obstacles to identifying, diagnosing, and explaining the effects of ideology on their critical capacities and practices. Arguably, showing that a contradiction is inscribed in the existing social order and can only be “dissolved” if this order itself is fundamentally transformed is also a task for a critical theory.

Although for most critical theorists ideology is not merely false consciousness but embedded in social practices and identities, ideology critique has been criticized for being overly cognitivist and underestimating the role of habitualized attitudes and cultural practices, for relying on an overly strong distinction between true and distorted consciousness, and for presupposing an idealized notion of the subject. Critics such as Foucault and Bourdieu speak instead of power-knowledge (Foucault 1973, 15) or of symbolic power and its embodiment (Bourdieu 1980, Ch. 8). The epistemological and political challenges the notion of ideology gives rise to continue to animate discussions (Celikates, Haslanger, and Stanley (eds.) forthcoming), including, more recently, on the relation between ideology and epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007, Mills 2017), cultural techné (Haslanger 2017a), and propaganda (Stanley 2015).

3.4 Emancipation

Frankfurt School critical theory inherits its emancipatory orientation from Marx, in the sense that it aims not only to understand, but also to contribute to a radical transformation of the social world that is already under way, and the commitment to real emancipation as requiring a radical, irreducibly social and political transformation that overcomes the fundamental contradictions of modern society instead of partial or local reforms aimed at surface-level symptoms. Emancipation is thus understood as liberation, including self-liberation, from domination by social, political, and economic powers, both personal and structural. Against this background, however, critical theorists have given different accounts of what emancipation is, what it requires, and how much can be said about it as a process and as an aim or state. While some (Horkheimer 1937a, Habermas 1968b) have thought of emancipation as a process of enlightenment and self-reflection that would allow for the realization of a rational organization of society, others thought of emancipation as sensual liberation (Marcuse 1969), or as emancipation from the (internalized) destructive imperatives of capitalism towards a state “of lying on water and looking peacefully at the sky” (Adorno 1951c [2005, 157]).

At the same time, and insofar as the working class has been integrated, fragmented, or at least reconstituted, it has become increasingly less clear who is to be emancipated (or self-emancipated) from which forms of domination and how. The challenges to the possibility of emancipation include reflections on the potentially overblown ideals of autonomy, sovereignty, and transparency that seem to underlie it (Laclau 1992), the limits of active self-transformation under conditions in which subjects have been shaped by power-ridden forms of subjectivation (Allen 2015), and the prospects of overcoming capitalism given the apparent lack of any clear and viable alternative. Today, critical theorists also face the challenge of reorienting the emancipatory project in the face of a catastrophic

climate crisis that seems to privilege adaptation, mitigation, and sheer survival over utopian visions of emancipation that have also served historically as a pretext for an extractive and dominating relation to nature (Brown 2022).

In light of these challenges, a critical theory that wishes to hold on to its emancipatory orientation will need to articulate emancipation as an immanent possibility that is enabled and in some ways required by unprecedented historical developments. Whether in doing so it can build on the presumption of an emancipatory interest of the oppressed that theorists from Marx and Horkheimer to Habermas and Honneth (2017) have sought to identify remains contested. But thinking of emancipation as a second-order process that aims at enabling collective practices of self-determination over and against the obstacles picked out by concepts such as alienation, reification, and ideology, rather than as a substantial ideal or positive utopian vision of emancipation to be attained, might provide a starting point. Insofar as critical theory continues to see the existing social order as one of structurally entrenched domination, exploitation, and alienation, it will also continue to rely on some notion of an emancipatory process that points beyond those structures, even if this process is invariably plural, non-teleological, open-ended, and negative in orientation.

4. Critical Theories Today

Marx defined critical theory as the “self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age” (Marx 1843). The vitality of this approach to critical theory depends on continually taking up this task in new social contexts, as the first generation of the Frankfurt School did. Contemporary critical theorists continue this legacy by engaging with and theorizing in relation to contemporary struggles, crises, and practices. This has meant engaging a much wider range of emancipatory social movements than earlier generations of the Frankfurt School, who focused more on class struggle and capitalism (and the ways these were entangled with antisemitism and fascism) while largely neglecting issues like colonialism, racism, and the subordination of women. Contemporary critical theorists have expanded and enriched the Frankfurt School tradition by engaging with, and in some cases making contributions to, feminist theory, critical race theory, and postcolonial and decolonial theory (4.1), enlarging their analyses of crises beyond capitalism and its contradictions (4.2), and exploring a variety of critical practices ranging from civil disobedience to prefigurative, abolitionist, and revolutionary practices (4.3).

4.1 Theorizing Struggles and Movements

As emphasized above, Frankfurt School critical theory is methodologically interdisciplinary and defined by its aim of contributing to the emancipatory transformation of society by critically reflecting on the ways in which thinking itself can be distorted by structures of domination. This is also true of the various forms of critical theorizing that have emerged from and in relation to struggles against gendered oppression, racism, and colonialism and its legacies. Indeed, those critical theories bring to light structures of domination and modes of thinking (patriarchy, white supremacy, neocolonialism and Eurocentrism) that have until recently been neglected by the Frankfurt School and must be taken into account by any theory that aims to be critical and emancipatory.

4.1.1 Gender

More than one feminist theorist has argued that engaging feminism has been, and still is, crucial to renewing Frankfurt School critical theory both methodologically and in order to live up to its emancipatory aims (Fraser 1985, Ferrarese 2018). But analyzing the intersection between feminist theory and the Frankfurt School is complicated by the diverse array of theorists on both sides of that intersection. Some of the debates among feminist critical theorists mirror debates already discussed, for instance between those who draw on first generation versus Habermas or those who embrace Habermasian versus poststructuralist critical theory.

In most accounts, the first generation of the Frankfurt School is portrayed as not including any women and, with the exception of Marcuse in the 1970s (Marcuse 1974), its main protagonists largely failed to theorize about gender-based oppression or engage with feminist movements or the feminist theory of their time (there is, however, a new research project at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt that aims to challenge the dominant historiography by highlighting contributions of female researchers such as Käthe Weil and Else Frenkel-Brunswik and feminist work within the Frankfurt School). While fully acknowledging why feminists might find little of value in the first generation, some feminist theorists have highlighted important methodological affinities between, and potential for productive engagement with, that body of work (Brown 2006, Heberle 2006, Marasco 2006). In spite of the first generation’s nostalgia for the authority of the patriarchal family, their studies of authoritarianism were groundbreaking in analyzing the family as a political institution and breeding ground for fascism (Marasco 2018). Recent interest in Adorno’s work in particular builds on his theory of the nonidentical as support for the feminist critique of essentialist identities as well as affinities between feminist aims and his deconstruction of dualisms like nature and history or reason and desire, and his appeal to lived experience as crucial to philosophy and critique (Heberle 2006, 5–6). Attempts at synthesis include using his theory of the nonidentical, in dialogue with Lacan and Marx, to theorize a new approach to feminist political subjectivity (Leeb 2017), and combining Adorno’s insights into “bourgeois coldness” with the feminist ethics of care to rethink the fragility of our concern for others within a capitalist form of life that fosters “generalized indifference” while also producing a gendered form of attention to others (Ferrarese 2018).

Turning to the second generation, the critique of Habermas's failure to adequately theorize gender in his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) was a turning point. In a now-classic essay, Nancy Fraser (1985) took a cue from the Marx quote about critical theory reflecting on the struggles of the age to criticize the Frankfurt School, and Habermas in particular, for failing to theorize one of the most significant struggles against domination. Seyla Benhabib raised similar concerns about whether the theory of communicative action could adequately theorize the feminist movement (1986, 252), and in *Situating the Self* (1992) aimed to make Habermasian discourse theory more cognizant of the self as gendered (see also the essays collected in Meehan 1995). In his later discourse theory of democracy, Habermas does engage the feminist theory and politics of equality to illuminate his core thesis about how private and public autonomy mutually presuppose each other (1992 [1996, 418–427]). But feminist critical theorists maintain that his rationalist approach fails to adequately capture the way power operates (Allen 2008, Ch. 5; McNay 2022, Ch. 1) or to incorporate forms of communication like narrative that have been crucial to feminism (Lara 1998, 2021; Young 2000).

The third generation of the Frankfurt School represents a crucial shift, with prominent feminist theorists like Fraser and Benhabib attempting to make critical theory more amenable to feminism from within the tradition, while also engaging in debates with leading figures in the poststructuralist strand of feminist critical theory like Judith Butler (Benhabib et al. 1995). A core issue in these debates has been between Habermasian feminists who stress autonomy and poststructuralists who stress the idea of subjection – the ways in which power is central to the formation of subjects and their desires (Butler 1997). Amy Allen critically engages and synthesizes insights from both sides of this debate in viewing subjects as both constituted through relations of power and able to exercise autonomy in the form of critical reflection (Allen 2008). Axel Honneth, another key figure in the third generation, has engaged with feminist theory (Honneth 2000) and the feminist movement (2011 [2014, 154–176]), and in debates with feminist critical theorists including Fraser (Fraser and Honneth 2003) and Butler (Ikäheimo et al. 2021), but his work has also been the subject of sustained feminist critique of his conception of love, the family, and caring labor (Young 2007, Rössler 2007, Wimbauer 2023).

Fraser has, over several decades, developed a systematic defense of socialist feminism while charting various shifts in the feminist movement (see the essays collected in Fraser 2013), recently making the case that the contemporary crisis in care work must be understood as part of a larger general crisis in capitalist society (Fraser 2016, 2022, Ch. 3). Other feminist critical theorists also argue for a return to the critique of capitalism as crucial to feminist theorizing (Leeb 2017). From a different perspective, Lois McNay argues that recent Frankfurt School theorists, not only Honneth and Forst but also Fraser and Jaeggi, have failed to adequately incorporate the experience of gendered oppression into critical theory (McNay 2022). Another set of challenges arises from the need to develop an intersectional analysis of power and domination while engaging with a broader range of work in feminist and gender theory including queer and trans* theory as well as transnational and postcolonial feminism (Allen 2019, 537–538).

4.1.2 Race

Apart from the influential studies on antisemitism and fascism by the first generation, Frankfurt School theorists have until recently shown little interest in issues of race and racism despite the prominence of anti-racist struggles and theorizing throughout the twentieth century and the present. The silence is of course not total. Early analyses point to prejudice toward Jews and other minority groups as an important part of the authoritarian personality and a key mechanism of providing “pseudo-orientation in an estranged world” (Adorno et al. 1950, 622), diagnose a culturalist transformation of the earlier biological racism at the center of fascism in post-war Europe that serves to maintain white supremacy (Adorno 1955, 148–9), and identify the phantasmatic dimension of racism and its fictions of homogeneity, purity, and essential difference (Adorno 1967a). Arguably, there are also broader methodological lessons from the relational and materialist theory of antisemitism developed by Adorno and Horkheimer that also hold for the study of racism (even if their relation remains contested, see Catlin 2023), namely the rejection of psychologizing and individualizing approaches, the insistence that the pathology always lies in the antisemitic or racist subjects and not in their victims, and the emphasis on structural factors that include the functional role of racism in the context of the crisis of capitalism and democracy (see Postone 1980 for an early attempt to explain modern antisemitism in relation to the nature of capitalism and the anti-capitalism of National Socialism).

Despite these openings, there has not been any sustained engagement with the phenomena of race and racism or with anti-racist struggles and theorizing, an eminently emancipatory form of knowledge production that, from W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon to Black feminism (Collins 1990, 2019, Mills 2017), has been engaged in crossing the theory-practice divide and articulating dominated standpoints in ways that should have been of significant interest to Frankfurt School theorists (Outlaw 2005; for a relatively early exception see McCarthy 2009).

This missed opportunity is all the more astonishing as the intersection of class and race, of racism and capitalism has been at the center of theorists that share a Marxist orientation, and even some closeness to the Frankfurt School, most notably Angela Davis – who had studied with Marcuse in the US and with Adorno in Frankfurt, and, following Marcuse, insists on the need to bridge the gap between theory and practice and to combine the critique of racism as well as gender-based domination with a critique of capitalism (Davis 1983, 2004) – and Stuart Hall, who, building on Marxist and post-Marxist approaches, theorizes racism as a historically variable response to crisis and as a mechanism that allows capital to divide the working class (Hall 2021).

In contrast to the first generation's focus on the "dark side" of modernity, later theorists, from Habermas to Honneth, developed a stronger commitment not only to Enlightenment values, but to the belief that these have been, more or less successfully, institutionalized in Western societies. As a result, their views clash with a core aim of Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw et al. 1995) – itself influenced by Marxist theories of the state and the law – namely, the aim of debunking the idea that the law and the state are neutral institutions that secure the common good and the rights of all as an ideology masking their character as instruments of racial (and class) oppression, as evidenced by massive and persistent inequalities that systematically disadvantage Blacks in the US in particular and racialized populations on a global scale, in various areas of life, from access to education, health, jobs, and housing to the risk of becoming a victim of police violence. According to this view, the forms of freedom and solidarity realized in liberal-democratic societies are not just contingently accompanied by exclusions of racialized groups, as if these values had only been insufficiently realized up to now and only need to be extended to those hitherto excluded. Rather, the thesis is that these exclusions have played a constitutive role in the history of these societies and their value systems and continue to shape them to this day, and that radical emancipation would therefore require developing entirely different visions of living together in freedom and solidarity (Kelley 2002).

More recently, Nancy Fraser (2022, Ch. 2) has picked up on Black Marxist discussions of racial capitalism (prominently Du Bois 1935) by arguing that capitalism provides a structural basis for racial oppression and thus exhibits an inherent (even if historically variable) tendency to racialize populations in order to more effectively expropriate and exploit them. Others have elaborated a relational and materialist understanding of racism that builds on how antisemitism was theorized in the early Frankfurt School, and how racism was rearticulated in a culturalist register in reaction to anticolonial and antiracist struggles (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991, Bojadžijev 2020). What these approaches share, and what might be a distinctive contribution of a critical theory of race and racism, is a commitment to understanding racism as a comprehensive social relation that needs to be understood in relation to broader (capitalist) social formations, "race" as an ideological effect rather than an unquestioned category for social analysis, and anti-racist struggles as a starting point for critical theorizing about race – commitments that are at least partially shared with important contributions in the critical philosophy of race (Mills 2003, Shelby 2003, Haslanger 2017b).

4.1.3 Colonialism and Post-colonialism

For all its focus on modes of domination in modern society, Frankfurt School critical theory has largely failed to address European colonialism and imperialism (Said 1993, 278) and their continuing effects in a world structured by massive inequalities and asymmetries between the Global North and the Global South. With a few recent exceptions to be discussed here, critical theorists in this tradition have not engaged much with the large body of postcolonial and decolonial theory, even if in recent years debates about the universal validity of human rights and cosmopolitanism, globalization and multiple modernities, religious pluralism and postsecularism, have provided ample occasion to go beyond still operative Eurocentric limitations and become more globally relevant (Mendieta 2007, Butler et al. 2011, Baum 2015, Ingram 2019, Kerner 2018; on some early Frankfurt School engagement with Chinese thought, specifically in Benjamin's work, see Ng 2023).

The main target of postcolonial critique is the idea of a universal history in which the central engine of progress is located in modern Europe while non-Europeans are viewed as always lagging behind. The story has taken many forms, from narratives of progress in Enlightenment thinkers and their critics, such as Hegel (Buck-Morss 2009), to nineteenth-century theories of racial hierarchy and twentieth-century theories of development that have been shaped by, and in turn, rationalized, racism, slavery, and imperialism (McCarthy 2009, Bhabha and Holmwood 2021). Both anticolonial struggles and theorizing (in the work of Mahatma Gandhi, Aimé Césaire, Fanon and others) have insisted that the history and present of capitalism and of modern European and North American societies are constitutively entangled with colonialism, imperialism, and their afterlives, and that taking their trajectory as paradigmatically modern ends up representing a specific and heterogeneous trajectory and experience as universal and self-contained (Grüner 2010). While some aspects of postcolonial critique can be seen as overlapping with the critique of conceptions of the subject, reason, and universal history in the early Frankfurt School, the former also goes beyond the latter by understanding these as the effects of specifically colonial forms of domination and by tracing a different genealogy of fascism through its roots in the colonialism of the nineteenth century (Bardawil 2018).

Recent decades have seen attempts to bring postcolonial theory into dialogue with the Frankfurt School. From the side of decolonial theory, Enrique Dussel has been one of the most prominent decolonial philosophers to engage with Frankfurt School philosophers, developing a global ethics of liberation in critical dialogue with the discourse ethics of Apel and Habermas (Dussel 1998; see also Dussel 2011 and Allen and Mendieta 2021).

From the side of Frankfurt School critical theory, postcolonial critique has been taken up in a variety of ways (see also Vázquez-Arroyo 2018). In the same spirit of Horkheimer and Adorno's attempt to critique enlightenment in the name of an alternative conception of enlightenment, both Susan Buck-Morss (2009) and Thomas McCarthy (2009) attempt to salvage something of the core idea that is the target of their critique: "universal history" for Buck-Morss, and "development" for McCarthy.

Amy Allen (2016), on the other hand, is more decidedly critical of the role of the discourse of "progress" and the role of such concepts in grounding normativity and shaping assumptions about historical development, modernization, and reason in the work of Habermas, Honneth, and Forst. She

regards the latter approaches as deeply Eurocentric and contrasts them with a contextualist form of critique, inspired by Foucault and Adorno, that takes the form of a critical history of the present that uncovers the deep entanglement between reason and domination. Calling for an even more thorough revision of historical narratives, conceptual frameworks, and normative criteria, Gurminder Bhambra (2021) argues that the prevalent understanding of modernity as an endogenous European achievement obscures the fact that colonization and slavery were integral to and constitutive of the Enlightenment project of modernity in both its epistemic and institutional dimensions, a task for which historical and theoretical resources beyond Adorno and Foucault would be required. Fundamental questions about modernity, the human subject, and freedom also emerge from an encounter between critical theory in the Frankfurt School tradition and Caribbean thought (Sealey and Davis forthcoming). In a similar vein, contemporary critics of the persistence of colonial structures point to how a denial of the colonial past reaffirms a violent global color line (Mbembe 2016) that affects how societies treat Indigenous peoples (Coulthard 2014) and racialized and migrant populations (Celikates 2022).

4.2 Diagnosing Crises

Diagnosing crises, and the social contradictions that give rise to them, is a hallmark of Hegelian-Marxist critical theory. Marx famously diagnosed capitalism as a crisis-ridden social system, and the early work of the first generation of the Frankfurt School was a response to the economic, social, and political crises of their time. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 1947) can be understood as addressing the crisis of reason that was experienced with the rise of National Socialism, but the critique of instrumental reason was disconnected from more concrete crises and struggles. Habermas aimed to restore the link between critique and crisis beginning with his 1973 book *Legitimation Crisis* (Benhabib 1986, 252–3, Cordero 2017, Ch. 3). Writing in the context of state-managed capitalism, Habermas diagnosed the distinctively *political* contradictions and potential for political crises within a social system that aims to steer the economy and manage economic crises (a point influentially elaborated by Offe 1984).

In subsequent decades, crisis critique, along with the critique of capitalism, was largely abandoned by Frankfurt School theorists (for a notable exception see Postone 1993). Renewed theoretical interest has coincided with rising public concern about social, political, and economic systems currently in, or always seemingly on the brink of, crisis, all against the backdrop of the unfolding effects of the ongoing climate catastrophe.

4.2.1 Economic Crises

Nancy Fraser was one of the first critical theorists to revive crisis critique and to do so as part of a comprehensive critique of capitalism that renews the link between analytical diagnosis and critique (Fraser 2011, 2014; see Wellmer 2014 for a critique of the Frankfurt School's earlier neglect). What distinguishes Fraser's approach is that it posits capitalism as the unifying causal link among seemingly distinct crises – in relation to care work, the environment, and political institutions – by viewing capitalism as an institutionalized social order in which the economic system “cannibalizes” the very conditions that make it possible within the spheres of social reproduction, the natural environment, and the political system (Fraser 2022). Fraser combines analysis of “objective” social conditions – contradictions and crises – with an orientation toward social movements by analyzing the “boundary struggles” that arise at the seams between the economic system and other domains, making the case for these struggles to unite around an anti-capitalist agenda.

In a similar way, Rahel Jaeggi has developed a crisis-oriented theory of immanent critique (2014, Ch. 6) that is not limited to diagnosing systemic dysfunction but includes the normative expectations and self-understandings of social agents (Jaeggi 2017a; see Fraser and Jaeggi 2018), but at a more abstract theoretical level than Fraser's immanent analysis of capitalism as a social order. Like Fraser and Jaeggi, Alena Azmanova argues for renewed attention to the critique of capitalism but is skeptical about how helpful “crisis” talk is (2014) and maintains that radical social change is possible without crisis, revolution, or utopia through a united struggle against forms of precarity that are endemic to contemporary capitalism (2020). More generally, the turn to economic crisis dynamics has also led to a renewed interest in work – its general significance, pathologies, and emancipatory potential (Jaeggi 2017b, Dejours et al. 2018, Honneth 2023).

4.2.2 Ecological Crises

Turning specifically to the ecological crisis, Frankfurt School theorists have only recently begun taking seriously the task of rethinking their approach to critical theory in the current context of an ongoing ecological disaster on a global scale (for an early exception, see Vogel 1996). Some critical theorists argue that this situation calls for a new paradigm of “Critical Naturalism” (Gregoratto et al., 2022); others argue for a fundamental rethinking of Western conceptions of human freedom and a radical shift in conceptions of the ethically good life as a precondition for the kind of radical social change required by the current crisis (Cooke 2020, 2023). Fraser focuses on the role of capitalism in the climate catastrophe and the need for eco-politics to be anti-capitalist so that we can reassert control over, and begin to reinvent from the ground up, our relation to nature (Fraser 2021, 2022; see Bernstein 2022 for a recent approach to such rethinking).

In rethinking our conception of nature, given the lack of serious attention to theorizing about nature in the second and, until quite recently, third generation of the Frankfurt School, it is not surprising that many critical theorists have looked more to the first generation (see the collected essays in Biro 2011), with Adorno's work viewed as a promising starting point for rethinking humans' relation to

nature (Cook 2011, Cassegård 2021, Ch. 3). Cook argues that the “project of showing that human history is always also natural history and that non-human nature is entwined with history... informs all Adorno’s work” and that there are important affinities between his work and proponents of radical ecology (Cook 2011, 1, 5–6). On the other hand, the view of nature as having a kind of otherness that is beyond and not fully graspable by humans – a view expressed at times by Adorno and Horkeimer as well as Marcuse – has been criticized in favor of a more Hegelian-Marxist approach that sees “nature” as a product of human activity (Vogel 1996, 2011). Others argue for reviving critical engagement with Marcuse’s work as a resource for addressing the ecological crisis, with its combination of a critique of science and technology (most radically, as a call for a “new science”) with the idea that social transformation must include a changed, aesthetic relation to nature (Feenberg 2023a, 2023b). At this point, it is clear that there must be more engagement between Frankfurt School theorists and the many “critical ecologies” being developed today, e.g., deep ecology, eco-feminism, eco-socialism, ecological Marxism, environmental justice, indigenous and decolonial ecologies, and new materialism (on the recent dialogue between Frankfurt School theorists and new materialism, see Rosa et al., 2021).

4.2.3 Political Crises

Finally, Frankfurt School theorists have turned their attention to political crises and the rise of right-wing populist, authoritarian, and neo-fascist movements, parties, and governments (Brown, Gordon, and Pensky 2018, Gordon 2017, Abromeit 2016). This crisis is particularly important because adequately addressing the economic and ecological crises of our time requires political solutions, which will be hindered by political systems that are themselves in crisis, thereby contributing to a regressive dynamic (Jaeggi 2022, Forst 2023).

From the perspective of critical theorists, there seem to be two aspects of the political crisis that are often missing from mainstream liberal accounts. The first pertains to the genesis and the causes of the crisis (Brown 2019, Gambetti 2020). Against accounts that see authoritarianism only in terms of a rupture with and as entirely foreign to liberal democracy, they argue that we need to examine the continuities and enabling conditions that allow authoritarian tendencies to arise from within liberal-democratic capitalist societies. Without analyzing the neoliberal restructuring of social relations and the ways in which populist and authoritarian movements exploit electoral strategies, fragmented public spheres, and liberal ideological frameworks such as “freedom of speech,” the critique of and resistance to them will necessarily remain truncated.

The second aspect pertains to the dynamic of authoritarianism and the political crisis it engenders. Beyond focusing on its political dimension (e.g. political aims and values), critical theorists have sought to analyze the socio-cultural, affective, and psycho-social dynamics of authoritarianism and its attractiveness to populations that seem to have little to gain from the election of populist leaders (Marasco 2018, Brown 2019, McAfee 2019, Redecker 2020, Zaretsky 2022). These approaches can draw on and are supported by Adorno’s analysis (1967a) of core features of authoritarian right-wing populism. First, it is not so much actual abandonment but a feared, anticipated, or imagined abandonment, along with a perceived loss of privileges that had come to seem natural, that are the driving force of the rise of a reactionary authoritarianism that then gets misdescribed as a revolt of the oppressed and exploited. Second, the proponents of authoritarianism, following an antisemitic and/or racist logic, personalize the blame for their fears and feelings of abandonment by projecting it onto groups they classify as alien, rather than attributing it to structural features of society.

In responding to all the crises discussed here – economic, ecological, and political – critical theorists must grapple with a number of challenges. Purely at the level of theory, there is the question of whether positing unity or convergence among crises is diagnostically accurate. At a practical level, it remains to be seen whether a unity thesis will be politically motivating and whether a convergence of social struggles is indeed on the horizon. The issue of practice also bears on the question of whether and to what extent the objective conditions of crisis and contradiction diagnosed by critical theorists actually affect people’s everyday lived experience and become motivating factors for political movements (see [Section 2.5](#)). Such questions about the relation between theory and practice have long been a focus of critical theorists and have recently gained attention in theorizing about a range of critical and political practices.

4.3 Critical Practices

While overcoming the gap between theory and practice has been a central methodological and political concern for critical theorists, critics have pointed out the prominent turn away from practice to theory in the first generation – accused by Lukács of taking up residence in the “Grand Hotel Abyss” (Lukács 1963, 22) – and the continued marginalization of critical praxis in later generations (Harcourt 2020). There are multiple grounds for challenging this assessment. Frankfurt School theorists had arguments all along about how to assess and relate to radical movements, such as the student movement of 1968 (Adorno and Marcuse 1969, Freyenhagen 2014, Pickford 2023), and there has always been a strand that continuously engaged with struggles and movements, from Marcuse to Negt and Kluge and Fraser. Some critical theorists have focused on deliberative democracy, the public sphere, and civil society (Habermas 1962, 1992, 2021, Cohen and Arato 1992, Benhabib 2004, Lafont 2019) as core fora for critical practice, while others have argued for critical theory itself to be democratized and understood as a critical practice (Bohman 2003, Celikates 2009).

Still, many of these approaches have been criticized for prioritizing institutional achievements over struggles and critical practices, and reform over revolution. Given the challenges outlined above (4.2), it is not surprising that some recent work tries to reverse this tendency by exploring more

radical responses to such crises. These attempts notably push beyond the dichotomy between reform and revolution – for example, by promoting non-reformist reforms that could “alter the terrain on which future struggles will be waged, thus expanding the set of feasible options for future reforms” (Fraser, in Fraser and Honneth 2003, 79) – and mine the rich history and present of radical struggles outside traditional forms of political organizing such as the party or reimagine the party in radical ways (Dean 2016).

The range of critical practices engaged with by critical theorists past and present is extensive (for an inventory, see Harcourt 2020, Ch. 15). Frankfurt School theorists of earlier generations covered various forms of resistance, from the “Great Refusal” of the 1960s (Marcuse) and the potential for resistance in independent thinking and critical analysis in the face of universal reification (Adorno) to civil disobedience as a sign of a dynamic public sphere and civil society (Habermas 1983b, Cohen and Arato 1992, Ch. 11). More recently, critical theorists within various traditions have analyzed forms of disobedience (direct, digital, migrant etc.) as political practices of contestation and struggles for democratization “from below” (Young 2001, Smith 2013, Scheuerman 2018, Celikates 2019b). Other practices of resistance that do not directly engage with state institutions or appeal to the broader public include forms of sabotage (Malm 2020), fleeing, withdrawal, or defection. These turn away from what are seen as state-oriented struggles for visibility, recognition, or representation (Virno 2004, Roberts 2015) and towards subaltern forms of sociality (Moten and Harney 2013) and counter-communities that prefigure fundamental alternatives for living together (Loick 2021). Emphasizing the revolutionary dimension of critical practices, theorists have drawn on the abolitionist tradition of struggles against slavery and colonialism, and its revitalization in movements like Black Lives Matter, to call for a fundamental critique of racial capitalism and its entanglement with the punitive state, and a correspondingly radical transformation of all social relations and institutions (Davis 2005, Gilmore 2022). Critical theorists have also explored political practices of assembling (Butler 2015), occupying, striking, and reorganizing processes of social reproduction (Gago 2019), linking these to the need to rethink revolution beyond the model of a single break or event and more as an interstitial process (Redecker 2018, Saar 2020).

Whether the new revolutionary subjects and struggles that emerge in these critical practices will indeed converge to fundamentally challenge the existing order, open up new pathways to emancipation, and develop emancipated – more just, democratic, and sustainable – modes of living together remains to be seen. Horkheimer’s quip still holds: “if the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the eating here is still in the future” (1937a [1972, 220–1]). Against this background, theoretical explorations of critical practices – in the multiplicity of their forms, terrains, and actors – can be seen as part of the ongoing attempt to bring theory and practice together with an emancipatory orientation in light of the crises and struggles of the age. This approach has characterized the Frankfurt School from its very beginnings and has been a driving force in its continual (self-)transformation, making it into one of the most influential paradigms in social philosophy today.